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According to scholar Courtney Bender, the percentage of the US population which says it believes in God but does not have or chooses no religious preference has gone up 20% in the past 30 years. In the first few pages of the introduction to her book, *New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination,* Bender states that she was seeking to find out „how and where people became spiritual, not religious, and what kind of structures supported their narratives and practices" (2010: 3).

What she finds in her research is that the line that many religious scholars draw with their methodologies between people who are spiritual and people who are religious is quite blurry and, at times, unnecessary. This is one of the main reasons that makes this book so compelling for religious studies at this point in time. For Bender, the typical paradigm in this relationship is that religion has to do with institutions of people with a shared history and shared practices. Spirituality, on the other hand, refers to individual seekers who seek a very personal experience that is hard to fully characterize in a social setting. Many times, this paradigm, according to Bender, leaves spirituality as more akin to the secular than to religious – a point that has been well substantiated in the field of religious studies. As an Associate Professor of Religion at New York's Columbia University, Bender spent over two years doing an ethnographic study in Cambridge, Massachusetts with many different groups of people who considered themselves spiritual but did not identify completely with any particular organized religion. She referred to these groups of people interested in „metaphysical culture and religious experiences" as The New Metaphysicals (2010: 19). In regards to the like-minded socialized practices of traditional and institutional religious groups, Bender found that many of these New Metaphysicals in Cambridge practicing their own brand of spirituality were quite similar to followers steeped in traditional and institutional religion. With a variety and depth of research and interviews, she was able to make a case for this point quite effectively. She noted in her research a variety of differences in theory and practice within and among these groups of people. Regardless of this, these groups of spiritual seekers in Cambridge resembled traditional religious practitioners in the realm of socialized religious practice based on historical and cultural grounds. This was the case even if this socialized practice among these Metaphysicals was seemingly non-traditional and even unorthodox at times.

Many of the people Bender interviewed in her ethnographic research in Cambridge included: Swedenborgians, Neo-Pagans, Shamanic healers,

Spiritualists, Alternative medicine practitioners, drumming and dance groups, and a host of other groups and individuals interested in astral travel, mysticism, and other alternative spiritual interests. This itself illustrates the range and scope of just how extensive her research was in examining Cambridge's New Metaphysicals. Bender points out in her research that Cambridge has always had a rich history in alternative spirituality since „prominent figures in Transcendentalism, Spiritualism, Christian Science, (…) have important Cambridge chapters" and thinkers like William James and Ralph Waldo Emerson had also lived there (2010: 4). Regardless of this, Bender observes,that „many of the people I met in Cambridge were wholly uninterested in these pasts" (2010: 4). They simply were not fascinated with the fact that Cambridge had had such a long and distinguished history in the realm of alternative spirituality. According to Bender, many of these different types of people when referring to Cambridge's past did so „to call to attention to a shared and timeless quest for knowledge" and not to place themselves within a historical narrative (2010: 4).

In examining these New Metaphysicals, Bender aimed to show how a variety of mystical and harmonial traditions in Cambridge shared common bonds in the form of active shared practices and a shared history much like traditional religious groups. This being the case, even if at first glance, these New Metaphysicals, as both individual groups and individuals themselves, might have seemed quite individualistic and even secular in regards to their spiritual practices. Bender witnessed many different groups of people of varying metaphysical interests congregating together and sharing spaces such as yoga studios, chapels, and meetinghouses to interact and support one another in the sharing of ideas and spiritual practices. These active and organized spiritual practices included a range of interests such as yoga, reiki, meditation, dance, and a variety of many other spiritual practices from an array of traditions. These meetings were held in an effort to cultivate a collaborative spirit with other spiritual seekers of other metaphysical interests and yet, all the while, each of these New Metaphysicals could also maintain their own individual spiritual searches as „people learning to be spiritual practitioners on their own" (2010: 23). Without categorizing and reinterpreting them, Bender let each individual she interviewed characterize each of their own individual experiences for themselves in their own discursive manner. In each of these Metaphysical's individual stories, Bender states that she found „discursive elements that my respondents used to articulate authoritative and authentic experience narratives that also produce their self-representations as religious individuals" within a group setting (2010: 58). In this manner, Bender was successful in showing how these New Metaphysicals were similar to traditional religious followers in the realm of shared practice. She was also able to let each of these Metaphysicals speak for themselves so they could keep their own unique spiritual point of view without having to be generalized and to avoid having their individual beliefs marginalized in this manner.

Bender found several shared features and patterns among these New Metaphysical's individual stories even as they emphasized the uniqueness of their individual experiences. Many of these people spoke of similar discursive experiences as a result of applying active internal and external shared practices that would „vigorously pursue, cultivate, and develop experience with the divine

energies that they believe underlie all experiences and all of life" (2010: 90). Many of them also emphasized feeling rather than knowing as the basis for all genuine spiritual and religious experience. In their use of shared practices, many of these New Metaphysicals used a variety of practices from various religious traditions with the intent of using them in the most appropriate manner to improve their spiritual growth. Bender does acknowledge the criticisms many of these spiritual seekers get for appropriating practices from various religious traditions, but wants more to focus on „investigating the practices that articulate a place for mystics within the world" (2010: 154). Many of Bender's New Metaphysicals fully acknowledged these criticisms and used them as motivations to make sure they used a particular practice from a particular religious tradition in the most appropriate manner. Bender points out that many of these Metaphysicals believed that „inappropriate uses of other's traditions was a barrier to spiritual growth" (2010: 154). While she does acknowledge the criticisms that these Metaphysicals have garnered for the way they use certain religious practices, she does so only briefly. She tries to balance out the critical view with an inclusive one that attempts to give the reader a balanced two-fold perspective of the issue. Professor Bender does a decent job in straddling both sides of this issue although perhaps a bit more examination into this topic would have been useful.

Bender continually reminds the reader that spirituality is so multifaceted and is such a constantly changing entity that it is important and „necessary to engage spirituality historically, institutionally, and imaginatively without pulling it together into a single thing"(2010: 6) This theme is very effectively and creatively repeated throughout the book. As Bender notes several times, many categories and methodologies used by scholars fail to properly grasp and understand spirituality in this manner. According to Bender, this is because many methodological categories have the tendency to be constrictive and limiting and many times this tendency puts alternative spirituality in a subordinate and inferior position when compared to traditional religion. Many traditional paradigms of religion and spirituality, in their attempts to concretize what is religious and what is spiritual, prove to be counterproductive by not fairly and flexibly showing both the similarities and distinctions between the religious, the spiritual, and the secular. This is a major reason why Bender avoids categorical descriptions and uses individual discursive narrative instead in her study – effective tools to deal with something as nebulous and ineffable as „spirituality". This technique, critics could argue, would make Benders work fall into an extreme relativism that would not be useful in religious studies. Yet, as Bender concludes, „we must approach spirituality and 'the spiritual' in America as deeply entangled in various religious and secular histories, social structures, and cultural practices" (2010: 183). She goes on to say that this is because spirituality is „lived in concrete and complex ways in contemporary American life", and „is produced in multiple social institutions, including many that we do not consider religious" (2010: 183).