

BOOK REVIEW

***Strange Rites:
New Religions for a Godless World***

by Tara Isabella Burton

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We live in an era of religious awakening, of sorts. It may not be recognized, and the very idea might seem absurd if one takes for granted that religion is giving way to secularism. Is religion not losing its hold on people? Are the churches not emptying? Are there not more and more people who report on surveys that they have no religious affiliation—the so-called Nones? Are we not constantly hearing atheists celebrating these trends and believers lamenting them?

Yes, but as Tara Isabella Burton shows us in *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*, upon closer examination, the decline of institutional religion does not mean a decline of religious belief and practice. Even many of the Nones hold a variety of supernatural beliefs—perhaps a belief in God or a higher power, in heaven or reincarnation, in fortune telling or witchcraft. They may also engage in religious practices—attending church, meditation, or casting spells. And they may infuse practices normally thought of as non-religious with religious meaning and fervor—dieting, exercise, pop culture, or politics.

Just as many of those identifying as unaffiliated with any religion still embrace a variety of religious beliefs and practices, so do many of those who identify as affiliated with traditional religion. It might be surprising that 60 percent of Nones believe in astrology, reincarnation, psychics, or spiritual energy in physical objects, but if so it must be at least as surprising that 60 percent of those who identify as Christians believe in at least one of these non-Christian beliefs as well, including 29 percent who believe in reincarnation (22). Increasingly religious affiliation may not reveal much about someone's actual beliefs and practices.

Religious affiliation is less important because the ascendant form of religion is what Burton calls Remixed religion. Regardless of whether people identify with a particular religious tradition, they mix and match different beliefs and practices to create a personal faith and identity—a religion of the self that is intuitional rather than institutional.

Some readers might bristle at Burton's description of American religious life. Most will probably agree that magic, witchcraft, New Age religion, and the prosperity gospel are religious in some sense. But are SoulCycle, CrossFit, Harry Potter fandom, social justice culture, transhumanism, and alt-right reaction really religions? Well, it depends on what we mean by religion. Social scientists have not agreed on the essence of religion, which they have variously

identified as the ability to provide meaning, purpose, community, or ritual. For Burton, all four of these are aspects of religion, but they are also variable aspects. So the question is not so much whether something counts as a religion, but rather to what degree it functions as a religion in someone's life — the degree to which someone derives meaning from it, to which it gives them a purpose for their lives, to which their community is grounded in it, or to which there are rituals attached to it.

When we think of traditional, institutional religion, we think of meaning, purpose, community, and ritual all coming from the same source of faith and practiced similarly by those who share in that faith. A Christian might derive her understanding of the meaning of her life and of her place in the world and the universe from Christian theology. This meaning would lead her to see her purpose in life as following Christ, and unite her with a church community which sees the world similarly and gathers each week to pray and worship together.

The rise of Remixed and intuitional religion means that religion is less often structured by these elements. And it is not because people are less devout, as there have always been various degrees of belief and participation in religion. Rather, it is that they increasingly derive meaning from one or more sources, then purpose, community, and ritual from various other sources. They do a lot of mixing and matching.

If Burton is correct, this development poses new challenges both for sociologists trying to understand religion as well as for Christians trying to live out their faith. The challenge for sociologists is to develop better ways of conceptualizing and measuring religion, as survey questions about religious identification, and even religious participation, become inadequate in describing contemporary religion. Simplifications that worked when religion was less variant may now mislead more than they inform. For example, having a category of religiously unaffiliated people, the Nones, made sense when they were a small segment of the population, but it makes much less sense when they are the largest single religious demographic, highly diverse, and often very religious.

One way sociologists might better understand religion is by thinking of it as an ideal type, as Max Weber did with bureaucracy and other concepts varying along multiple important dimensions. The ideal-type method enables identification of the clearest example of a phenomenon, not because these are the most common cases of it, but because thinking about the clearest possible example enables better understanding and description of the variation actually extant. In this case, if the ideal form of religion is the provision of meaning, purpose, community, and ritual, it is immediately evident that even traditional forms were never the sole source of all of these for anyone. At various times, they have been stronger in one aspect than another, and some mixing and matching has always occurred. However, as the degree of mixing and matching has increased, it becomes more important to understand religion as variable from one person to the next, and to find ways to measure religious beliefs and practices the old categories fail to capture.

For Christians, the challenge of the rise of Remixed and intuitional religion, and the fragmentation of religious life it brings, is in resisting the temptation to remix religion where doing so is at odds with Christian faith. From the standpoint of Christianity, some of the phenomena Burton examines might be things Christians are free to engage, while others are things they need to eschew. But the issue is not just that Christians should stay completely away from, say, witchcraft or alt-right racism, while they might do yoga or CrossFit without treating it as a religion. That is important, but an important and less obvious danger from the new culture of Remixed religion is the intuitionalism that is both a cause of the Remixing and is also the core belief behind what is otherwise a cacophony of individualized religious beliefs and practices. The intuitionalism of the new religions means, in Burton's words, "that their sense of meaning is based in narratives that simultaneously reject clear-cut creedal metaphysical doctrines and institutional hierarchies and place the locus of authority on people's experiential emotions, what you might call gut instinct. . . Most of these religions share, too, the grand narrative that oppressive societies and unfairly narrow expectations stymie natural — and sometimes even divine — human potential" (33).

Intuitionalism leads to Remixed religion because if we follow our emotions, if we seek liberation from anything that would constrain us, if we seek to realize our human potential, we are free to draw from many sources to create our own meaning, purpose, community, and ritual. And while this presents a view of reality at odds with the Christian idea that we are wholly dependent on God, that we're sinners in need of divine grace, the danger is that even though we identify as Christian, that lived Christianity might become a Remixed Christianity, another intuitional religion of the self. Rather than finding our identity in Christ, we could end up using Christ as part of our own branding. Our Christianity could become our own, where we end up constructing a personalized set of beliefs and practices that work for us and help us fulfill our human potential.

Nevertheless, even as we resist intuitionalism in our own lives and churches, we need to understand that the rise of Remixed religion is due in part to the failures of institutional Christianity. "Traditional religions, traditional political hierarchies, and traditional understandings of society," Burton says, "have been unwilling or unable to offer compellingly meaningful accounts of the world, provide their members with purpose, foster sustainable communities, or put forth evocative rituals" (242). And if Christians believe that true meaning, purpose, community, and ritual actually are to be found in Christ, we have to acknowledge that where the church has failed in this, it is due to our own failures in following him.

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