Episode Book

EPISODE #5928

Believing Without Belonging: The Religion of One

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SYNOPSIS

What do you call someone who believes in God but belongs to no religion? Sociologist Grace Davie named it "believing without belonging" in 1990, and the phenomenon has only grown harder to pin down since. This episode digs into the vocabulary (four competing terms, no consensus), the counts (Pew finds 70% of American "nones" believe in God or a higher power, yet the global picture swings tenfold), and the human question underneath: are these people searching for a community, or content with a private faith and no affiliation at all? Along the way: why 22% of self-described atheists say they believe in some higher power, why the same person can answer "no" to God and "yes" to a universal spirit in the same survey, and the sharp critique from clergy who call the whole thing laziness.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

There's a standard map of belief that most of us carry around. Atheists on one side, the great organized traditions on the other.



Herman

And a whole continent in between that the map just leaves blank.



Corn

Daniel's asking about the blank part. He says he's always been curious about a third group. People who believe in God, or gods, or some kind of divine entity, but whose beliefs don't map onto any recognized religion. Maybe they built it themselves through reflection. Maybe they borrowed from four traditions and named none of them.



Herman

And he wants to know what we actually know about them.



Corn

He wants the vocabulary first. Is there a term. Then the count. Have sociologists tried to quantify this, do we have credible estimates, how many people worldwide believe in God without identifying with a tradition. Then the human question. Do these people go looking for a community that matches what they already believe, or are they content with a private relationship and no affiliation at all. And finally, is any of this new. Has there always been a crowd whose sense of God lived outside the institutions, or did we invent them in the last sixty years.



Herman

He called it a religion of one.



Corn

That's his phrase, and he wants to know what that population can tell us about the difference between belief, identity, and the search itself.



Herman

It turns out there is a name for this, and a deep body of research behind it. The numbers are just messier than you'd expect.



Corn

Start with the name.



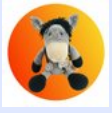
Herman

Grace Davie, British sociologist of religion, coined "believing without belonging" in a 1990 article and built it into a book a few years later on religion in Britain since the war. Her subject was the persistence of the sacred in a society where churchgoing had plainly collapsed. Those two things were supposed to move together. They didn't.



Corn

Which breaks the older story.



Herman

The secularization thesis, yes. The prediction was that as societies modernized, religion would wither. Instead what happened is that belief and belonging came apart. People walked out of the institutions and kept the belief. Davie's line is that religious life is not so much disappearing as mutating. She's right, and the mutation is what Daniel is asking about.



Corn

This is the thread from that episode we did on whether modern life is making us more religious.



Herman

It picks up exactly there. The secularization story was always more complicated than the headline, and this is the complication.



Corn

So the vocabulary exists. One term.



Herman

One canonical term, and about four competitors. That's the first thing worth noticing. "Believing without belonging" comes out of British sociology. "Spiritual but not religious" is the one people say about themselves, and it comes out of American survey work. Thomas Luckmann wrote about "invisible religion" back in 1967. Thomas Moore's book is literally called *A Religion of One's Own*. Each one is slicing the elephant a little differently.



Corn

Four terms, no agreement.



Herman

The lack of consensus is itself the finding. The phenomenon is real and it's slippery, so every tradition names the part it can see.



Corn

So how many are there.



Herman

This is where it gets interesting, because the answer depends on the question. Pew's January 2024 report on the American "nones," and nones means atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular. Seventy percent of them say they believe in God or another higher power. Only nineteen percent are strict nonbelievers on every measure you could apply.



Corn

So the fastest-growing religious category in the country is mostly believers.



Herman

The nones are not a fortress of atheism. Inside that group, thirteen percent believe in the God of the Bible. Fifty-six percent believe in some other higher power but not the biblical God. And twenty-two percent of self-described atheists say they believe in some other higher power or spiritual force.



Corn

Atheists.



Herman

Self-described. Twenty-two percent.



Corn

Herman, that's not a category, that's a shrug.



Herman

It's a real finding and it's embarrassing for everybody who writes about this. An AP-NORC poll found thirty percent of Americans don't identify with a religious group, and forty-three percent of those nones say they believe in God. Even while disliking organized religion.



Corn

Disliking the institution and keeping the belief. Those are separable.



Herman

They're separable, and the global picture makes the point harder. Pew's September 2025 report across twenty-two countries found belief among the unaffiliated ranging from ninety-two percent in Brazil and eighty-six percent in Colombia down to eighteen percent in Australia, ten percent in Sweden, nine percent in Hungary.



Corn

That's a tenfold spread.



Herman

Same survey instrument, same question, wildly different answers. And the US sits at forty-five percent of nones believing in God, which is roughly in the middle.



Corn

Which tells you the third group isn't a stage of development. It's a cultural fact.



Herman

It's shaped by the country it sits in. In Latin America and South Africa, unaffiliated doesn't mean secular. It means detached from the institution while the surrounding culture is still soaked in belief. In Scandinavia, unaffiliated mostly means what Americans think it means.



Corn

Hold on. The American number moved.



Herman

It did, and that's the part I'd frame carefully. Forty-five percent of nones believing in God in one Pew survey, fifty-four percent believing in God or a universal spirit in the Religious Landscape Study a year later. Same population, same era. Nine points of difference, all of it in the wording.



Corn

So a chunk of this population is manufactured by the questionnaire.



Herman

Pew says it outright. The responses are very sensitive to differences in question wording. Ask a man if he believes in God and he says no. Ask him if he believes in a universal spirit and he says yes. He hasn't changed his mind between the two phone calls. He's answering two different questions.



Corn

That's a real problem for anyone trying to count these people.



Herman

It's a real problem, and no organization publishes a single worldwide figure for the group. Country by country, depend on wording. That's what exists.



Corn

Try the other slice. The ones who say it about themselves.



Herman

Spiritual but not religious. Pew's December 2023 report puts that at twenty-two percent of Americans. They think of themselves as spiritual, or they rate spirituality as very important, but they don't describe themselves as religious.



Corn

Twenty-two percent. And the number's been moving.



Herman

In 2017 Pew estimated twenty-seven percent without asking the label directly. The direct question gets twenty-two. That gap is the same problem in miniature.



Corn

Who are they.



Herman

Younger, fifty-eight percent under fifty. More Democratic-leaning, sixty percent. And their beliefs are a different shape from religious Americans. Twenty percent of the SBNR believe in the God of the Bible, versus eighty-two percent of religious Americans. But seventy-three percent believe in some other higher power or spiritual force, versus sixteen percent of religious Americans.



Corn

So the label tracks a specific theology, not just a level of commitment.



Herman

It tracks a specific theology. The SBNR are not lukewarm religious people. They are a different kind of believer. Eighty-eight percent say there's something spiritual beyond the natural world. Eighty-nine percent say humans have a soul or spirit.



Corn

Those are not small numbers for a group that's supposed to be drifting into unbelief.



Herman

Nearly nine in ten. And the earlier Pew work on what Americans mean when they say they believe in God found one-third of the country believes in a higher power but not the God of the Bible. Fifty-six percent believe in the biblical God. Ten percent believe in no higher power at all.



Corn

A third of the country, on the middle shelf.



Herman

That's the third group, roughly measured, sitting inside the largest religious country in the developed world.



Corn

So the answer to Daniel's first two questions. Yes, there's a term, and no, nobody can put one number on it.



Herman

There's a term. There are four or five. And the population swings by ten points depending on how you ask. Both of those are true at once, and that's not a failure of the research. That's the honest shape of the thing.



Corn

What about the human part. Are these people looking for a home.



Herman

Mostly no. Only eleven percent of SBNRs are involved in a religious community, against sixty-two percent of religious Americans. Thirteen percent are in what you'd call a spiritual community. Ninety percent of nones seldom or never attend services, and seventy-one percent seldom or never pray.



Corn

Seldom or never pray is the one that stops me.



Herman

It's a big finding. A private believer who doesn't pray is not running an underground church in his living room. He holds a belief and does almost nothing with it, in the conventional sense.



Corn

That's not a movement. That's a mood.



Herman

And it splits at least five ways. Linda Mercadante's book *Belief without Borders* sorts them into types. Dissenters, who are protesting something, or drifted, or conscientious objectors to the institution. Casuals, who use spirituality therapeutically, on an as-needed basis. Explorers, spiritual tourists with no intention of ever committing. Seekers, looking for a spiritual home. And Immigrants, trying on a new spiritual identity.



Corn

Only the last two are looking for the building.



Herman

Only Seekers and Immigrants. The rest are not seeking. The Casuals and Explorers aren't lost. They're not wandering toward your congregation. They've considered it and declined.



Corn

So the answer to Daniel's question is that many are content, and the ones who aren't belong to two named categories out of five.



Herman

Which is a more precise answer than most coverage gives.



Corn

There's a critique of this whole thing, isn't there.



Herman

A sharp one, and it comes from inside religion as much as outside. Lillian Daniel, a liberal Protestant minister, wrote that the SBNR are right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating. That's a minister taking aim at people she could have been pastoring.



Corn

That's a well-aimed sentence.



Herman

The Jesuit James Martin called the lifestyle plain old laziness, and said spirituality without religion can become a self-centered complacency divorced from the wisdom of a community. And the sociologist Robert Wuthnow called some of this mysticism shallow and inauthentic.



Corn

The community critique is the serious one.



Herman

It's the serious one. The argument isn't that private belief is false. It's that belief handed down through a tradition has been tested by generations, corrected by argument, and carried by people who will sit with you when your wife dies. A religion of one has none of that. It has exactly one member, and he can't be corrected by anybody.



Corn

Which is a real loss, and I don't think the defenders answer it.



Herman

They answer it differently. They'd say they're not claiming to have a community. They're claiming to have integrity. The tradition as practiced in their town wasn't offering the thing it promised, so they kept the belief and dropped the wrapper. Calling that laziness assumes the building was doing its job.



Corn

Both of those can be true of different people.



Herman

And Mercadante's typology is basically that. Some are lazy Casuals. Some are Seekers who couldn't find a home. Same survey category, different souls in it.



Corn

Who brings up the history. Is this new.



Herman

The received story is that it's modern, and specifically that it dates to the Romantic turn, through the sixties counterculture and the eighties New Age. William James defined religious experience as the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, and that's read as the founding charter.



Corn

The sixties again.



Herman

The sixties get blamed for a lot. And the scholar Siobhan Chandler pushes back hard. She argues that appreciating the god within is not a twentieth century notion with roots in the counterculture or the New Age, but that spirituality as a concept has pervaded all of history.



Corn

So which is it.



Herman

I think both, and the distinction is cleaner than it looks. What's modern is the category. Mercadante's point is that in earlier eras, religion and culture and national identity were often inseparable. You didn't opt into a religion. It came with the village, the language, the burial ground. What we now call spirituality was often just called piety, and the Church was the only structure it lived in.



Corn

So the impulse is old and the option is new.



Herman

The option is new. For most of history, a man with a private sense of the divine had no social slot to occupy. He either kept it inside a tradition or he kept it to himself. What's changed is that the society now has a box for him, and it's a big one. That's a real change even if the feeling isn't.



Corn

Davie has a companion idea, doesn't she. The flip side.



Herman

Vicarious religion. Religion actively maintained only by a minority but widely claimed by the majority as part of their cultural heritage. The church is a resource you call on when you need it. A funeral, a christening, a disaster. And some European scholars describe their countries as belonging without believing, which is the mirror image of Daniel's group.



Corn

Same person, both directions.



Herman

Often the same person. He doesn't go, he doesn't pray, he'd say he's not religious. But he'd be married in the church and buried from it, and he'd be insulted if it closed. That's belonging without believing sitting in the same skull as believing without belonging, depending on the question.



Corn

Davie's other line is the one that stings.



Herman

She describes a shift from an ethic of obligation to an ethic of consumption. I go to church because I want to fulfil a particular rather than a general need in my life, but I have no obligation either to attend in the first place or to continue if I don't want to.



Corn

That's the whole thesis in one sentence. The institution stopped being an obligation and became a service.



Herman

And the customer can leave. That's not a religious fact, it's a fact about every institution in the modern West. The synagogue, the union, the bowling league, the newspaper. They all moved from obligation to consumption, and the ones that survive do it by being worth the trip.



Corn

So the third group isn't a religious story. It's the same story everywhere, with God in it.



Herman

That's how I'd put it. And it means the question isn't whether these people are sincere. They are. The question is whether any institution can hold a population that has been taught to consume.



Corn

Thomas Moore's line is the counterweight. He says the world is heading for a completely secular approach to life, which is to say soulless, which is to say disaster. We need a new way to be religious, a really new way.



Herman

He's not arguing for a return to the parish. He's arguing that the private thing needs a shape, and a private thing with no shape tends to dissolve.



Corn

And the data supports the dissolving more than the flourishing. One in ten in any community.



Herman

One in ten in a religious community. Thirteen percent in a spiritual one. That's the number I'd hold onto. It's easy to believe in God alone. It's much harder to keep believing anything alone for forty years.



Corn

You're saying the belief is durable and the practice isn't.



Herman

I'm saying a belief that never gets said out loud and never gets argued with has no maintenance. The tradition is the maintenance schedule. Drop the schedule and the engine still turns for a while.



Corn

That's the mutation, though. Davie's word. Not the death.



Herman

And the mutation may be the more interesting animal. The one that lives on the shelf and holds a belief and tells the survey it believes in a universal spirit and means it.



Corn

There's the candle in Daniel's question, somewhere.



Herman

There's the candle. It's just usually unlit and nobody's watching.



Hilbert

The Sunday candle is a whole thing and I know about it because my cousin does it.



Hilbert

Twenty minutes. Every Sunday morning, a candle, one page from a book that isn't a holy book, and then silence for exactly twenty minutes. No building, no congregation, no doctrine. He's been doing it since before I met him and he has never once called it a religion.



Corn

That's the whole category in one kitchen.



Hilbert

He asked me to join it. I said yes, and I did it for three weeks. I stopped because he insists on absolute silence and I could not stop thinking about a sandwich.



Corn

A sandwich ended a spiritual practice.



Hilbert

It was a specific sandwich. It's not the point.



Herman

Twenty minutes of silence doesn't sound like a rule anyone would need.



Hilbert

He has a timer. It's from a kitchen. He's replaced it twice. The second one was a gift from me because I broke the first by picking it up to see if it was still going.



Corn

You broke the timer.



Hilbert

I checked the time on the timer. That's different.



Herman

Did he make you buy a new one.



Hilbert

I bought a better one. It has three buttons now. He only uses the first one.



Corn

And what's on the page he reads.



Hilbert

Poetry. Some of it's not good. That's not the point either.



Herman

The book changes?



Hilbert

The book changes, the candle doesn't. Same kind of candle, same brand, he buys them by the box. Forty in a box.



Corn

Forty Sundays.



Hilbert

He's on his fourth box.



Herman

What does he do when he travels?



Hilbert

He takes a candle with him. In his bag, in a shirt, wrapped in the shirt. He's had one confiscated at an airport. He bought another one at the airport and it cost him eleven dollars, which he still brings up.



Corn

Eleven dollars for a candle.



Hilbert

He'll tell you about it. He doesn't tell anyone about the twenty minutes. He doesn't want to be counted as a none. He says a survey would get him wrong and it would be their fault.



Herman

So he'd call himself what.



Hilbert

He'd call himself nothing. Then he'd light the candle.



Corn

And do you ever do it.



Hilbert

Sometimes. Alone. Same candle, no timer. If I had a timer I'd be doing his thing and it wouldn't be mine.



Corn

Does your cousin know.



Hilbert

No.



Herman

Are you going to tell him?



Hilbert

I haven't decided. I've been not deciding for a while now.



Corn

So the survey gets you too.



Hilbert

The survey gets everybody. That's the trouble with asking.



Corn

Here's what I'd take from that. The private practice is real, it's specific, and it's been running for years without a single witness, and it changes nothing about how the man would answer a pollster.



Herman

Which means the number we have is a floor. The third group is at least as big as what Pew measured, and Pew itself says the measurement moves with the wording.



Corn

If the belief holds and the institution doesn't, what happens to the institution.



Herman

It gets smaller and older and it keeps the people who come for the community rather than the doctrine, which is already what's happening. The interesting question is whether the private thing stays private or whether some new shape grows up around it. Nobody has one yet.



Corn

Sixty years of people believing alone and nobody's built the building.



Herman

Nobody's built the building. Whatever the next institutional form of this is, it hasn't been invented, and it's possible it can't be. A community of people who by definition don't want a community is a hard thing to organize.



Corn

Which is why I think the mutation framing is the right one, and it's also where I'd push back on the idea that this is a healthy new thing. It's a mutation. It may be a fatal one.



Herman

Chandler would say the impulse is older than the counting, and she's right. The god within isn't a sixties invention. The category is. The practice that man runs with a candle and a kitchen timer would have been called piety three hundred years ago, and it would have lived inside a church, whether he liked it or not.



Corn

The candle has moved out of the building. That's the whole episode.



Herman

It's the whole episode, and it isn't a failure of religion. It's a mutation of it. The failure story is the boring one. The mutation is the more interesting animal.



Corn

Daniel asked how many people have a religion of one, and the honest answer is that we can count the shelf, not the candles.



Herman

We can count the shelf and the shelf is big.



Corn

That's the episode. Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, who produces all of this and occasionally breaks a kitchen timer.



Herman

We broke nothing. He checked the time.



Corn

If you want more of this, try episode thirteen eighty-three, Why Modern Life Is Making Us More Religious. This has been My Weird Prompts. If you enjoyed it, leave a review wherever you listen. It helps other people find the show, and it's the whole reason we get to keep doing this.



Herman

Send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot. We'll be back soon.

SOURCES

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