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Younger faith followers are changing what faith looks like, adjusting traditions and celebrating their religions away from traditional institutions. Photo by Godsgirl_madi via Pixabay/Creative Commons (Religion News Service)

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At 18, Sam still identifies himself as a Catholic. But if it partly defines him, it doesn't limit him. "I regularly practice centering prayer and was involved in a centering prayer group, which wasn't technically Catholic," he recently told us as we researched Gen Z's attitudes toward faith.

"But through that, I discovered a lot of other kinds of inner spiritual traditions," Sam continued. "I like to say, when you're finding God in silence, it doesn't really matter what you call God: It's the same God. The Sufi tradition in Islam, I find, resonates with my experiences. Also, the contemplative tradition and different Indian practices of nonduality and mindfulness, Buddhism, all these things."

Given the decline in attendance at houses of worship and the so-called rise of nones, it might come as a surprise that the majority of young people say they are spiritual and/or religious. According to those who participated in Springtide Research Institute's State of Religion and Young People 2020, 78% of people ages 13-25 consider themselves at least slightly spiritual, including 60% of unaffiliated young people (atheists, agnostics and nones). And 71% say they are at least slightly religious, including 38% of the unaffiliated.

This might surprise their elders because their spiritual or religious lives often don't happen at a temple, synagogue or church. Take weddings, which historically have caused even casually religious people to adopt the rituals of a traditional faith. Though 75% of Gen Zers surveyed by The Knot in 2019 said they have a religious background, only 18% said they planned to observe formal religious traditions at their wedding, while nearly 87% saw themselves making their own traditions — including putting a twist on religious practices.

Instead of having religious ceremonies led by ordained ministers at houses of worship, Gen Z is coming up with more personalized marriage rituals, inviting friends to officiate in beautiful outdoor settings. Often these ceremonies weave together secular or cultural sources — poetry, music, family stories — with religious ones: Bible readings, a breaking of the glass, a blessing.

This eclecticism exhibits itself in their daily practice as well. Young people are figuring out how to draw on religious and spiritual support to make it through life's challenges and to celebrate its joys, but they are increasingly doing so outside of formal structures and venues of faith.

And even if they find their religious identity or community in a consistent source, like Sam, more and more GenZers are drawing on various traditions, familial lineages and wisdom sources. New data we released recently showed that 51% of young people of various faith identities engage in tarot cards or other fortune telling practices.

The coming generation may be investing more in faith because of stress and loss. After a year navigating the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020-2021), over a third of young people (35%) said their faith became stronger, while only 11% said their faith became weaker (half said their faith remained steady). Even more, 46% started new religious or spiritual practices during this time, far more than the 27% who stopped some religious or practices.

The caveat for anyone hoping to turn Gen Z into the generation that came back to church is that while today's young people take what they find useful in faith traditions, this group has significant trust issues when it comes to formal religious institutions. Asked to rate their trust of organized religion on a 10-point scale, 63% of young people answered 5 or below, including 52% of those who say they're affiliated with a religious tradition.

You read that right: Over half of young people who claim a religious affiliation have little trust in the very religious institutions with which they identify.

Where trust in religious institutions is low, however, trust in relationships with people in those institutions is extremely high.

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Faith leaders who want to appeal to Gen Z need to focus on gaining trust through relationship rather than relying on their institutional authority — their title, role or accomplishments. To be sure, Gen Z members respect expertise, so long as it is combined with genuine care and concern for their well-being — an approach Springtide calls relational authority.

Faith leaders will also need to make the effort to go out and find Gen Zers. Many faith leaders today are asking how they can reach this generation, but few are actually doing so. Just 8% of young people say there is a religious leader they can turn to if needed, and just 10% of young people say a religious leader reached out to check in during the first year of the pandemic.

But in encountering Gen Z, pastors, rabbis, imams and gurus would be well advised to make room for this generation's organic and free-flowing approach to spirituality, in their communities and liturgy, resisting the temptation to see this as a kind of selfish spiritual path. Gen Z members are doing this expansive and curious work of constructing their faith whether or not faith leaders are showing up to guide them — but when caring adults walk alongside them and invest in their lives, it makes a difference.

The question is not whether Gen Zers are going to abandon religious institutions — they're already well on their way. The question is whether faith leaders will walk alongside them as they encounter the divine in new ways.

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