

# Happy Are the Spiritual

By [Paul Moses](#)

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People pray during the Interfaith Prayer Service for Peace and Solidarity Sept. 19 at Kiener Plaza in downtown St. Louis (CNS photo/Teak Phillips, St. Louis Review)

Are you satisfied with your life? If you count yourself as both spiritual and religious, it's very likely that you are.

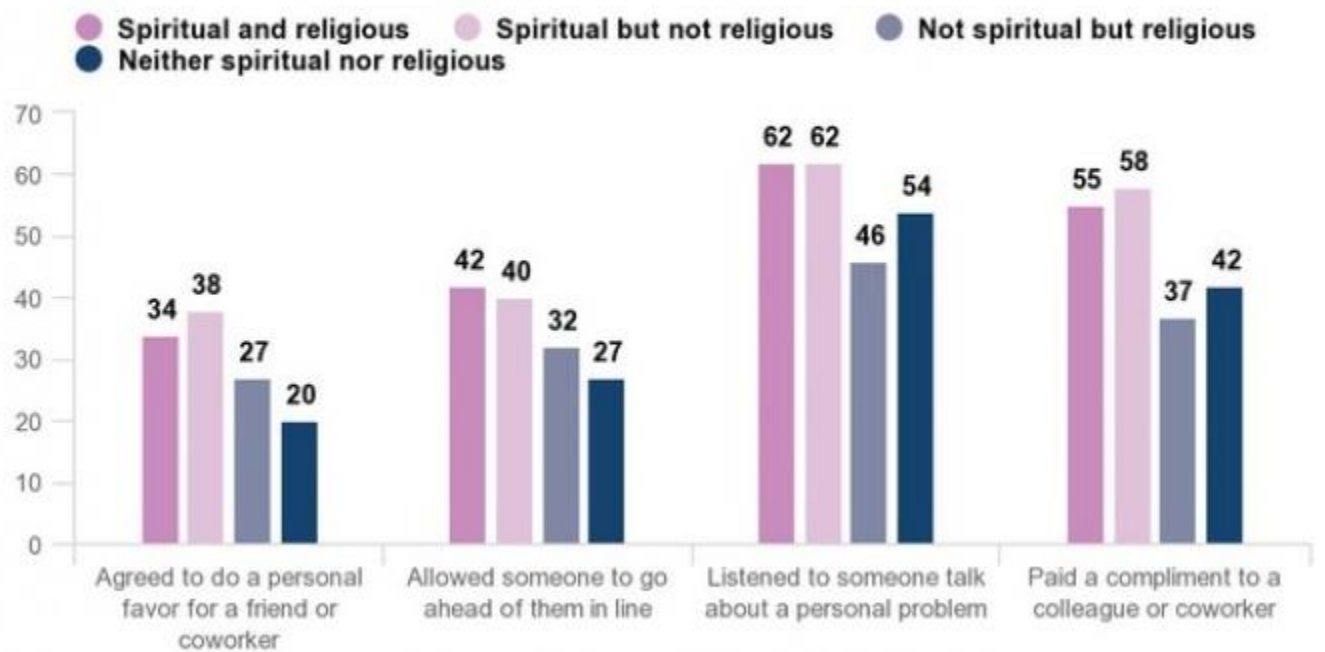
That's one of the interesting findings in a [survey](#) issued November 6 by Public Religion Research Institute and Florida State University. It divides the American populace four ways, and measures the number of people in each group who have a high degree of satisfaction in their lives:

Spiritual and religious: 73 percent  
Spiritual but not religious: 63 percent  
Not spiritual but religious: 54 percent  
Not spiritual or religious: 47 percent

Furthermore, spiritual Americans are more likely to let someone cut ahead on a line; to have done a personal favor for a friend or co-worker or paid a compliment; and to listen to someone talk about a personal problem. Spiritual Americans were also more likely to be with friends at least once a week and to spend time gardening, hiking, or enjoying the outdoors. Responses from the two “spiritual” groups—religious or not—were similar. The differences were with the non-spiritual groups.

### Spiritual Americans Report More Frequent Pro-Social Behaviors

Percent who say that in the last week, they have...



Source: PRRI/Florida State University 2017 Inspirational Media Survey.

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Spiritual people were much more likely to be moved or inspired by a media experience. Thirty-one percent said they had found inspiration in a book over the past week, compared to 14 percent for those who are not spiritual.

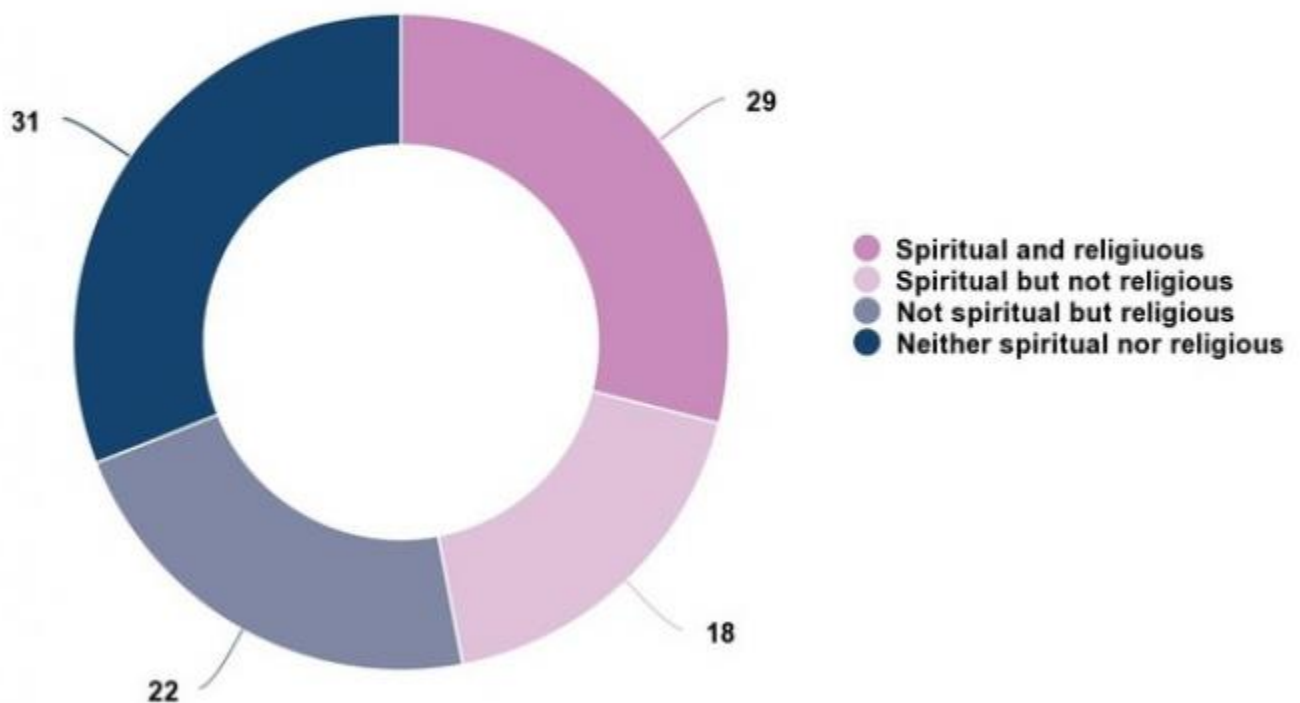
One of the biggest gaps came in response to the question of whether one was touched, moved, or inspired within the last week while listening to a song or other piece of music. Seventy-one percent of the spiritual Americans said they enjoyed that experience; just 43 percent of the nonspiritual Americans did, including 39 percent of those who are neither spiritual nor religious.

The researchers said they undertook the study to find out more about the growing group of Americans not affiliated with a religion. They wrote:

Despite the widespread attention that the spiritual but not religious group has received in recent years, there have been few efforts to undertake a rigorous investigation of the complex interplay of spirituality and religiosity among the American public. This report focuses on the group of Americans who are spiritual but not religious and explores the unique contribution that spirituality makes on personal behavior and decisions.

### A New Look at American Spirituality and Religiosity

Percent of Americans who identify as...



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Spirituality and religiosity tend to correlate, the study said, but not always. To determine the difficult question of who is spiritual, the researchers analyzed responses to three questions: whether the interviewee “felt particularly connected to the world around you,” “felt like you were a part of something much larger than yourself,” and “felt a sense of larger meaning or purpose in life.” The categories stacked up this way:

Spiritual and religious: 29 percent  
Spiritual but not religious: 18 percent

Not spiritual but religious: 22 percent  
Not spiritual or religious: 31 percent.

What the study tells me is that people who are spiritual—religious or not—are major contributors to building social capital, the glue that holds a community together. This seems to jibe with findings of Robert Putnam and David Campbell in their comprehensive study *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. They found that religious Americans, whether conservative or liberal, were much more involved civically than secular ones.

While the two “spiritual” groups have a lot in common, there is a sharp difference in political ideology. Some 44 percent of the “spiritual and religious” group are conservative, compared to just 17 percent of the spiritual but non-religious. That’s consistent with another finding Putnam and Campbell emphasized: the influence of conservative politics in organized religion was a significant factor in the growth of non-affiliation. The “spiritual but not religious” are also more likely than any other group to have an independent political party affiliation.

For efforts to improve Catholic evangelization, the study would indicate a need to reach out to the 15 percent of self-identifying Catholics who call themselves “spiritual but not religious.” And there might be some discussion of why so many Catholics—31 percent—are “not spiritual but religious.”

*Paul Moses, contributing editor at Commonweal, is a professor of journalism at Brooklyn College/CUNY, is the author of *The Saint and the Sultan: The Crusades, Islam and Francis of Assisi's Mission of Peace* (Doubleday, 2009) and *An Unlikely Union: The Love-Hate Story of New York's Irish and Italians* (NYU Press, 2015). Follow him on Twitter @PaulBMoses.*