

## EXPLORATION

## Boomers Search for the Wisdom in Faith

**M**embers of the generation that came of age tripping on mind-altering substances are more than likely exploring a new path at midlife and beyond: spiritual enlighten-



**MATT THORNHILL**  
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ment. In our work at the Boomer Project, we uncovered that baby boomers, now ages 44 to 62, are shifting their life's focus from trying to "become someone" to more about "being someone." This shift starts to happen

around age 50, truly "midlife" (at least) for most of us.

Boomers beyond age 50 typically have become more motivated by inner feelings and beliefs, and are not driven so much by what their friends, peers, co-workers, or even family feel or believe. Boomers at midlife are beginning to wonder about their purpose, and what legacy they will leave. And it is the culmination of these feelings that has many midlife boomers becoming more religious and spiritual.

Recently, the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life conducted the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey. The study includes reliable estimates of the size of religious groups in the United States as well as detailed information on their demographic characteristics, religious beliefs and practices, and basic social and political values. One significant finding is that the older you are, the more likely you say you belong to a particular religion. For boomers, six in seven identify a religious affiliation. One might surmise that with age comes wisdom, or at least faith.

Those at the other end of the age scale do not see the same light, with one in four under age 30 saying they

are not affiliated with any religion. At least not yet.

WITH THE median age in America fast approaching 40, it's no surprise that interest in religion and all things spiritual is on the rise. The fastest growing category of book sales in the United States is religious books, according to the latest figures from the Book Industry Study Group, which tracks sales data. The category grew 5.6 percent in 2006 when total book sales were only up about 3 percent.

I wondered about my own recent re-engagement with organized religion at age 48, after two decades of avoiding

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*A series on boomer-related issues.*

it. Being skeptical, I sought scientific evidence that with age comes faith — or least a greater ability to accept it. I found some in *The Mature Mind*, by Dr. Gene Cohen, a psychiatrist and gerontologist and the director of the Center on Aging at George Washington University. His book describes the positive power of the older brain; and he observes that in many ways the older brain is a smarter and wiser brain.

A concept introduced by Cohen is

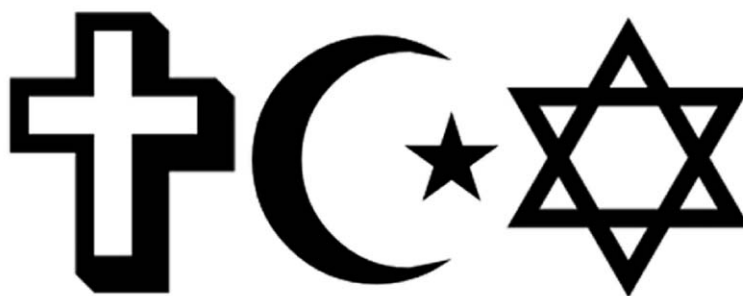
"developmental intelligence." This is the combination of wisdom, judgment, perspective, and vision one develops later in life. It is characterized by three types of thinking and reasoning typically developed after age 50 or so: *relativistic thinking* (recognizing that knowledge is relative and not absolute); *dualistic thinking* (the ability to uncover and resolve contradictions in opposing and seemingly incompatible views); and *systemic thinking* (being able to see the larger picture, to distinguish between the forest and the trees).

COHEN'S WORK, which is scientific and far afield from religion, actually explains why today's boomers are drawn to religion and spirituality: Accepting religion requires faith, which is not a black and white thing at all. Most religions require followers to uncover and resolve contradictions as a matter of course. And one must be able to see the larger picture in order to accept the tenets and beliefs of most religions. All of these tasks are much easier for boomers who have brains that are growing older and wiser every day.

Even if today's boomers don't find themselves back in the pews on Sunday (my church meets in a high school), they are exploring other paths to spirituality. There are resorts and spas like Miraval in Arizona offering mind, body, and spirit rejuvenation. And a nightclub called Spirit, in Ireland and soon to be in the U.S., with healthy food for the soul, massage and aromatherapy for the mind, and a dance floor and performances for the body.

Unconventional, for sure. Some might even say it's trippin'.

• Matt Thornhill is president of the Boomer Project. He can be reached at matt@boomerproject.com or (804) 690-4837.



## Six in seven boomers identify a religious affiliation

Age	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+
Christian (Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, etc.)	68	76	80	80	84	88
Other religions (Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, etc.)	6	5	4	5	5	4
No religion	25	19	15	14	10	8
Don't know/ Refused to answer	1	1	1	1	1	1

Due to rounding, figures may not add to 100.  
Source: Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, U.S. Religious Landscape Study, 2008