Spirituality and Public Action
by RPLP undergraduate student fellow Shannon Klein

At “Spirituality and Public Action,” an event co-sponsored by the RPLP and the Jung Center, panelists and audience members engaged in dialogue about the emergence of a growing group of Americans who identify as spiritual but not religious, and what this shift towards a separation between spirituality and religion might mean for morality and public action. Panelists Ashley Clemmer, Sean Fitzpatrick, and Lupe Mendez shared their own experiences and perspectives on the links between religion, spirituality, and community engagement.

In her opening remarks RPLP director Elaine Howard Ecklund, who moderated the event, provided some background on the emerging spiritual but not religious movement and thus helped frame the evening’s conversation.

“Americans are growing less religious in a lot of ways, but not necessarily less spiritual,” Ecklund began. From the RPLP’s Religious Understandings of Science study, which included a national survey, 33 percent responded that the label “spiritual” describes them either somewhat well or very well. The survey also asked “To what extent do you consider yourself a religious person?” and 20 percent said “not at all.” The people who fall into both of these groups can be considered “spiritual but not religious,” or SBNR, Ecklund explained. Six percent of survey respondents fell into the SBNR category. However Ecklund also emphasized the need for caution regarding this category, which can be very sensitive to the way questions are asked. Pew Research Center simply asked whether respondents considered themselves to be “a religious person” and “a spiritual person,” and they came up with about 27 percent SBNRs in 2017, a figure that was up significantly from 19 percent in 2012. This rise appears to be coming primarily at the expense of those who say they are religious and spiritual.

Following Ecklund’s opening remarks, panelists examined how spirituality shows up in community forms and practices, and described how spirituality can bring groups together and create an atmosphere of respect. Clemmer shared that in her work at the Rothko Chapel, she felt that spirituality created a group of people with diverse beliefs committed to being “thoughtful human beings moving through the world in a respectful way.” Panelists felt that the growing label of spiritual but not religious might be tied to the decline of institutional confidence in the church, and suggested that perhaps churches and religious groups could strive to become more inclusive of individuals with diverse life experiences and different views on spirituality.

Panelists concluded that while more research and conversation on the SBNR phenomenon is needed, spirituality without religion does not necessarily lead to less public action and engagement. Spirituality has a role to play in community action, even if it is not tied to religion.