

# “None”: The Changing Religious Landscape in the United States

By George Heron



George Heron

George Heron has been a member of the Saginaw Valley Torch Club since 1993 and has served on the IATC Board of Directors as Membership Director.

A Roman Catholic priest from 1965 to 1974, he was active in social action in Connecticut. In 1975, he began a career as a director of the United Way in Barberton, Ohio, and Bay County, Michigan, as well as remaining active in community organization projects.

He received a Master's in Theology from New York Theological University and a Master's in Social Work from Fordham University.

George is married to Carol, and they have four grown children. Now retired, he serves on multiple community boards and is an adjunct professor at Saginaw Valley State University School of Social Work.

He delivered this talk at the Saginaw Valley Torch Club in 2013.

A growing number of Americans, when asked their religious affiliation, respond “None.”

At present, 10 % of Americans are former practicing Catholics; one in three people raised as Catholics leave the church. The same percentage of people has left the main line Protestant Churches. 13 million individuals or 6% of the population are atheists, but that percentage has not changed significantly in the last fifty years. The

most significantly increasing share in the number and percentage of the population belongs to the “Nones,” who are not avowed atheists or agnostics but simply affirm that they do not practice a specific religion. They represent 14% of our population and are the subject of this paper.

The unaffiliated are here to stay and one of the fastest growing social classifications in our society. Unfortunately, many studies continue to describe them in a pejorative way. They are apostates, deserters, defectors, pagans, heretics, or heathens. That is why studies like the one conducted by the Pew Foundation prefers not to use the colloquialism Nones, which has a negative connotation, but rather the phrase “religiously unaffiliated.”

Who are the Nones? Why are the faiths they once practiced no longer a part of their lives? Researchers and the faiths themselves have been working hard to find the answers to those questions.

First, we will need a definition of religion. For the purposes of this paper, religion is a system of beliefs in a divine or supernatural power (theology) and practice of worship or other rituals directed toward such a power (liturgy). The purpose of believing and practicing religion is to find meaning to one's existence (morality) and a way of being (ethical behavior) for oneself and for others.

For much of human history, religion has been the most common means to help a person or society find meaning in life. It constitutes a basis for personal

beliefs, theories about oneself, other people, the world at large and our place in it. Put another way, religious beliefs form meaning systems that enable individuals to understand their existence and organize and manage their behavior.

For the vast majority of people, including the unaffiliated, the meaning in life and the meaning systems include the recognition of a god, supernatural being or force. However, there are various levels of certitude and understanding of what the concept of supernatural is. Three-quarters of the unaffiliated were raised in a family that practiced a religion, and many of them remain profoundly influenced by the meaning systems and principles that were a part of that experience. That is why so many of the unaffiliated still value spiritual life or talk of being “spiritual but not religious.”

A religious person includes religion and its teachings as the primary means to achieve and live their spiritual meaning in life, but a None does not. Nones do not even necessarily give up being committed Christians or Jews. But belonging to a congregation has ceased to be of any great importance to them.

Much of the available data on the unaffiliated was compiled by the Pew Foundation in a comprehensive, statistically rigorous study entitled “Nones on the Rise.”

In the 1930s and 1940s, the number of unaffiliated in America hovered around 5%. The number rose to 8% in the 1990s and is presently at 20% of the

population, or over 50 million people. To give you some perspective, that number is greater than the total number of American Methodists, Lutherans, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, Jews, Episcopalians, Mormons and Muslims combined.

Most significantly, their percentages by age group are:

65+	9%
50-64	15%
30-49	21%
18-29	33%

One out of every three persons under 30 years of age claims no religious affiliation.

Further statistics show that among them:

- There are more white persons than black or Hispanic persons.
- There are more men than women.
- There is no significant difference, relative to the affiliated, in their level of education
- There is no significant difference, relative to the affiliated, in their level of income
- More are unmarried than married
- More reside on the coastal states than south and middle states.

As regards the attitudes toward religion:

- 66% believe in God
- A majority state they are spiritual
- 74% were brought up in a religious household

- An overwhelming majority are not seeking another religion
- 33% say that religion, while they do not practice it, is somewhat important and a major institution to bring people together and in helping the poor and needy.

Faithful churchgoers, it turns out, may carry serious doubts about their faith, while Nones may have firm faith and deep convictions based upon religious teachings. The essential difference is the value placed upon committing oneself to the acceptance and practice of a religion.

Why are the numbers of the unaffiliated increasing? Answering that question calls for historical perspective.

After the Second World War, the American religious landscape was defined by what we could call a civil religion. President Eisenhower was a strong father figure; America was at peace and experiencing economic prosperity; a large middle class was developing, and families were living comfortably in fast growing, middle class suburbs. Churches and synagogues served as refuges and community centers for the Irish Catholics, German Lutherans, and European Jews, providing schools, hospitals and social service agencies.

We were “One Nation under God,” and we even enacted a law to include that reference to God in our Pledge of Allegiance. Church attendance was at an all-time high, and religious beliefs influenced our everyday lives, such as Sunday blue laws, prohibition of Sunday sales of liquor, movie censorship, and many laws relating to human sexual behavior.

However, this veneer began to crack, primarily among the youth and young adults, with a sexual revolution (between 1969 and 1973, a national Gallup poll showed the acceptance of

premarital sex increased from 25% to 50%) and intensifying focus on social justice issues such as poverty, civil rights, gender rights, ecumenism, peace, and inequities in housing, education, employment, and voting.

In this rejection of a highly organized, rigid, objective, and traditional morality, there was a rebellion for individual freedom of conscience and a new and personal morality. This liberation was not simply based upon hedonistic self-indulgence, as some claimed at the time, but on grave social issues such as civil rights, welfare rights, resistance to war, and women’s liberation.

In July 1965, *Time* magazine declared, “Today’s youth appear to be more committed to fundamental Western ethics, decency, tolerance, brotherhood than any generation since the age of chivalry; if they had an ideology, it would be idealism”.

One of the phenomena of this revolution was the unpreparedness of the parental generation and the secular and religious leaders. They lived in shock and confusion as the systems they were most comfortable with were being questioned, changed, or (most often) simply abandoned. When they did react, they often responded with entrenchment and reaction to social changes. There were major efforts to return to the post war culture of order, tradition, and obedience. Some churches tired of the social activist personnel who identified with the people and causes for change.

In Robert Putnam and David Campbell’s book *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, they describe the sexual revolution of the sixties as an earthquake for religions. The morphing of the religious reactions of the seventies and eighties into the Moral Majority they describe as an “aftershock”; every sect had its own version of this conservative reaction.

This reaction caused many clergy and laity (including myself) to disassociate themselves from their churches. As the Moral Majority movement grew among the churches, it stopped confining itself to religion and religious practices to bring people back to that old time religion, and became more and more intrusive into politics, advocating especially strongly to enact and maintain religiously based laws regarding sexual behavior and human relationships.

It became rare to see conservative religious and political persons involved in socially liberating issues or to see liberal religious and political persons in pews of evangelical and main line churches. We seemed to be becoming a nation of church going Republicans and secular Democrats.

During the Reagan years, the growth of the Nones stabilized even as the practice of religion became a political as well as a belief statement. In the nineties, however, and more frequently since the millennium, this divide has become more and more pronounced as conservative and main line churches became outspoken and doctrinal over issues of birth control, choice, gay rights, and gay marriage, and this had a major effect upon young adults.

The Pew Study and others agree that the primary reason for the growing number of persons leaving religious practice, especially the young, is the identification of religion with conservative politics and morality regarding human sexual practices and, as a result, they do not want to have any association with religion.

Putnam and Campbell argue that “religiosity and conservative politics became increasingly aligned, and abortion and gay rights became emblematic of the emergent culture wars” (120). The result, they write, was that many young Americans came to view religion as “judgmental,

homophobic, hypocritical, and too political” (121).

Let us review some other reasons and assumptions given for the rise of the Nones, especially among the young.

Some authors, especially those publishing in religious journals in response to the Pew Report, propose that the delay in marriage, basic social disengagement or apathy, secularization, and affluence are factors that influence the Nones. They seem to identify these negative social influences or personal weaknesses as the main drivers of non-affiliation—rather than the action or inactions of the religions themselves. Are they right?

#### **Are there more unmarried than married Nones?**

It is true that there is a high percentage of unmarried persons among the unaffiliated. Young married couples, especially with children, may have stronger motivations than the unmarried to participate in religion, with its opportunities for social networking, not to mention the feeling of obligation to give children a religious experience they had as children.

A significant finding in the Pew Foundation study, however, is the fact that the number of Nones in any generation group, as they move through life cycles of being single, married, with children, empty nesters, etc., is stable or more likely to increase than to decrease.

#### **Are the unaffiliated more socially unengaged?**

While a high percentage of Nones have a tendency to live more separate lives and engage in fewer communal activities, over 50% of people who practice religion share this tendency. It is true that people who practice religion volunteer and engage in more societal endeavors. An argument can be made that the intent of attending churches,

especially the new mega-churches with coffee shops, exercise classes, religious rock bands, and day care, might have as much to do with socializing as with religion.

#### **Does affluence beget secularization and religious unaffiliation?**

In looking at nations throughout the world, we often see a correlation between Gross National Product and religious observance: the higher the per capita wealth, the lower the religiosity. Affluence and worldliness are drawing people away from religion to secularism. In the United States, however, this is not so much the case. The Nones among our population are similar to the religiously affiliated in economic status and educational achievement.

The Pew Foundation study compares the perception of people in different countries regarding the importance of religion to everyday life. The greater the affluence and secularization, the less regard there is for religion. Surveys found, however, that the percentage of people who considered religion “very important” was much higher in the U. S. than in other relatively affluent countries:

Britain	17%
France	13%
Germany	21%
Spain	22%
United States	58%

America’s affluence and secularization do not seem to be compelling people to disassociate with religion.

The arguments for putting the onus for increasing religious disaffiliation on individuals or the culture rather than on the religions themselves do not appear strong. Should the religions be trying harder?

The tedium of ordinary worship is a long-standing problem. Catholics, for instance, are obligated to attend mass

even though the mass might be a boring experience. There is a story of the late Bishop Ken Untender of Saginaw, Michigan, attending a national gathering of bishops deliberating over the wording of a liturgical text. He interrupted the session on this point, stating that while the church was losing people in droves because they were bored, the hierarchy was debating language nuance. This incident is one of many speaking to the point that religion is no longer exempt from having to earn allegiance. The studies regarding the Nones indicate that this allegiance is not being earned.

\* \* \*

There are two general approaches in thinking of religion. Religion can be a system to help the individual find meaning in one's life, and it can also advocate for a world order, addressing the largest possible sense of community.

In the first approach, religion is a covenant with God. That is, one makes a commitment, a leap of faith to accept God and the theology that the God represents. Once one has faith and follows the particulars of the religion, one has spiritually arrived. This arrival creates a sense of righteousness and security. This approach, the approach of "faith," leads to a willingness and need to look to religion, its texts, and its teachings for direction in how one lives in the world.

An alternative approach is to see religion as a contract with one's fellow human being. In this approach, one practices his or her spirituality through good works and good actions. This approach does not have a sense of finality or accomplishment but rather as a work in progress. In this approach, the approach of "works," religious observance, texts, and teachings are but some of multiple resources to find meaning in life.

In a recent report by the Public Religious Research Institute and the

Brookings Institute, three out of ten Americans hold that being religious is "primarily about having faith and the right beliefs." For them, religion is about absolutes. However, six respondents out of ten say being a religious person "is primarily about living a good life and doing the right thing." For these people, religion is a process. This study shows that even among people who practice a religion, there is a majority who, like Nones, accept religion as a guide, a reference, and a resource rather than as an absolute or, in practice, an imperative.

This speaks to why a majority of people who are unaffiliated consider themselves spiritual. They might not hold to religious commitment or practice, but they live good lives and strive to do the right things.

The Nones are not only a major segment of our society, but also one that will likely continue to grow, especially among the young. To consider them apostates or deserters or heathens is unfair and untrue. One only has to read the Humanist Manifesto III, a list of ethical principles developed by atheists, to see how committed they are to their fellow humans.

It takes courage in our society to avow that you do not belong to a religion. A study conducted by the University of British Columbia concluded that people's attitudes toward atheists who are non-religious were more negative than those towards any other classification of people they studied. The vast majority of persons have been reared in homes where religious practice was not only a family experience but also a major weekly social event. Major life experiences were celebrated within religious ceremonies and events. People who do not share those experiences may seem—mistakenly—as a vague threat to the majority's way of life. We need to be willing to get past the idea that non-believers are some kind of dangerous "other."

Religion, with its philosophies, theologies, moralities, and ecclesiastical structures has been an essential part of our world history and in particular our American history. Our immigrant ancestors used their religious educational, health, social service, and social networks for their upward mobility, protection and safety. We must be ever grateful, and not disregard this rich history or dismantle its present day structures.

However, generation by generation, we grow more diverse, more questioning, and more critical. We seek more accountability and relevance. We are more independent, less fearful of the unknown. Our religions need to acknowledge this expansion of our knowledge, our experiences, and our options—to accept this reality, and indeed, respond to this reality.

Part of that reality is the growing number of people who live their lives based upon premises so clearly expressed by the wise prophet Rabbi Abraham Joshua Herschel (1907-1972): "God is greater than religion. Faith is greater than dogma."

## Works Cited

- Brookings Institute and the Public Religious Research Institute. "The 2013 Economic Values Survey." [www.brookings.edu](http://www.brookings.edu). July, 2013
- Gervais, Will M., Shariff, Azim F., and Norenzayan, Ara. "Do You Believe in Atheists? Distrust is Central to Anti Atheist Prejudice." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101:6 (Dec 2011), 1189-1206.
- Jones, Robert P. "One Person's Apostate is Another Person's Convert." *Humanity and Society*, Feb/March, 2012.
- Pew Research Center. "Nones on the Rise." [Pewforum.org](http://Pewforum.org). October, 2012.
- Putnam, Robert, and Campbell, David. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites America*. NY: Simon and Schuster, 2012.

---

*The publication of this article is funded by  
The Torch Foundation*