

CHAPTER 2

The Rise of the Nones: Why More Americans are Becoming Secular, and What that Means for America

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Introduction

There is no question that in Europe—as well as in other selected industrialized nations around the world such as Canada, Australia, and Japan—religion has been on the decline for the past century. The data concerning the observable secularization of these societies are virtually irrefutable.¹ Whether we are measuring belief, faith, church attendance, frequency of prayer, baptisms, self-identification—or any other indicator—the lessening of religiosity and the increase of secularity in these societies are both readily apparent. For example, in Canada one hundred years ago, only 2% of the population claimed to have no religion. But today, nearly 30% of Canadians claim as much,² and approximately one in five Canadians today does not believe in God.³ In Australia one hundred years ago, less than 1% of the population claimed no religious identity, but today, approximately 20% of Australians claim as much—and the current Prime Minister of Australia, Julia Gillard, is an open atheist.⁴ A century ago in Holland, around 10% of the population claimed to be religiously unaffiliated; today it is over 40%.⁵ In contemporary Great Britain, nearly half of the

people now claim no religious identity at all.⁶ The same is currently the case in Sweden, where approximately half the population self-identifies as secular.⁷ Furthermore, 61% of Czechs, 49% of Estonians, 45% of Slovenians, 34% of Bulgarians, and 31% of Norwegians do not believe in God,⁸ and 33% of the French, 27% of Belgians, and 25% of Germans, do not believe in God or any sort of universal spiritual life force. These are the highest rates of nonbelief ever recorded for these various nations.⁹

Secularization has been just as dramatic in parts of the Eastern world. Consider Japan: in the 1940s, about 60% of Japanese said they had religious beliefs, in the 1970s, it was down to 33%, and today it is around 20%. Faith in the existence of spiritual beings (such as Shinto gods) has also declined dramatically in Japan—down to 13% today. Back in 1970, there were 96,000 Buddhist Temples, but today it is down to 75,000—a decline of 20,000 in just 40 years. And of the remaining 75,000 temples still open for business, approximately 20,000 are unstaffed. Finally, the possession and use of household Buddhist altars in Japan has declined dramatically as well; only about 26% of city dwellers now have such altars in their homes.¹⁰

What about the United States? For many years, the United States has been held up as the great exception to this pattern of secularization. Indeed, by most accounts, it is the most religious of industrialized democracies. But that may be changing.

The Rise of Irreligion in the United States

Although religion still permeates public and cultural life in the United States, and although nonreligious Americans are still in the definite minority, their numbers are on the rise.

Consider the following:

- The percentage of Americans who claim “none” when asked what their religion is has grown from 8% back in 1990, up to somewhere between 20% and 30% today.¹¹

- In absolute numbers, approximately 660,000 Americans have joined the ranks of those claiming no religion every year during the last decade.¹² So nonreligious Americans are now the second largest “religious” group in the country.¹³
- About half of all “nones” are atheist or agnostic in orientation, about a quarter believe in a “higher power,” while only about 20% believe in a “personal God.”¹⁴ So the rise of irreligion also means a simultaneous rise of atheism and agnosticism as well.
- Twenty-seven percent of Americans currently claim to not practice any religion, with 22% specifically stating that religion is “not a factor” in their lives.¹⁵
- Rates of secularity are markedly stronger among younger Americans: 32% of Americans under age 30 are religiously unaffiliated.¹⁶
- The vast majority of nonreligious Americans are content with their current identity; among those men and women today who now claim “none” as their religion, nearly 90% say that they have no interest in looking for a religion that might be right for them.¹⁷
- The percentage of Americans who think that religion “can answer all or most of today’s problems” is 48%—an historic low.¹⁸
- Of Americans born between the years 1925 and 1943, less than 4% were raised with no religion, of those born between the years 1956 and 1970, 7% were raised with no religion, and of those Americans born between 1971 and 1992, almost 11% were raised that way.¹⁹

Given the preceding, it is safe to say that not only is the United States apparently not immune to the winds of secularization, but those winds have clearly been blowing with some significant effect these past 25 years. Religion in America is now on the decline. This is by no means inevitable, nor is it irreversible. But it is, without question, the current reality.

Causes

While there has been extensive debate and discussion about the very meanings and definitions of secularization,²⁰ I shall not summarize all of that here. Let me simply define secularization as the historical process whereby religion become less significant in social life: supernatural beliefs decline, religious ways of making sense of the world become less hegemonic, routine participation in religious activities drops, and religion plays a dwindling role in institutions exerting power and authority. In my opinion, the best theory of secularization comes from Norris and Inglehart,²¹ who argue that a decline in religiosity at the national level is linked to existential security. According to their theory, when most members of society have a secure existence (food, water, shelter, jobs, education, access to medication, etc.) and life is relatively free, safe, and nonviolent—then in such societies, religion weakens and secularity strengthens. Of course, despite the wide and seemingly global applicability of Norris and Inglehart's thesis, many causes of secularization are still always idiosyncratic and unique to any given society. By that, I simply mean that certain local factors that cause religion to weaken and decline in one society may not be what causes the weakening or declining of religion in another. Every nation has its unique historical story, its unique cultural traits, not to mention its economic, political, geographic,²² ethnic,²³ racial, sexual, religious, and artistic peculiarities. Thus, despite the impressive theoretical contribution of Norris and Inglehart, we must remain tentative about such broad attempts to explain secularization that ignore idiosyncratic, historical, and local differences and specific cultural peculiarities that exist between and among various societies. This chapter, of course, is concerned with the United States, and the recent decline of religiosity experienced there. The following sections outline what I consider to be the many specific causes of that decline.

Reaction against the Religious Right

Beginning in the 1980s, with the rise of such groups as the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition, the closeness of conservative

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Republicanism with Evangelical Christianity has been increasingly tight and publicly overt. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, more and more politicians on the right embraced the conservative Christian agenda, and more and more outspoken conservative Christians allied themselves with the Republican party. Examples abound, from Michelle Bachman to Ann Coulter, from Mike Huckabee to Pat Robertson. With an emphasis on seeking to make abortion illegal, fighting against gay rights (particularly gay marriage), supporting prayer in schools, advocating “abstinence only” sex education, opposing stem cell research, curtailing welfare spending, supporting Israel, opposing gun control, and celebrating the war on terrorism, conservative Christians have found a warm welcome within the Republican party, which has been clear about its openness to the conservative Christian agenda.

What this has done is turn off a lot of people from Christianity who were left-leaning or moderate politically. Sociologists Michael Hout and Claude Fischer have published compelling research indicating that much of the growth of “nones” in America is indeed attributable to a reaction against the increased, overt mixing of Christianity and conservative politics. As Hout and Fischer’s data indicate, the rise of irreligion has been partially related to the fact that lots of people who had weak or limited attachments to religion and were either moderate or liberal politically, found themselves at odds with the conservative political agenda of the Christian Right, and thus reacted by severing their already somewhat weak attachment to religion.²² Or as sociologist Mark Chaves puts it, “After 1990 more people thought that saying you were religious was tantamount to saying you were a conservative Republican. So people who are not Republicans now are more likely to say that they have no religion.”²³

Reaction against the Catholic Priest Pedophile Scandal

Another likely cause of the recent rise of irreligion in America is a backlash against the Catholic Church’s pedophile priest scandal.

For decades, the higher-ups in the Catholic Church would reassign known sexual predators to remote parishes, rather than have them arrested and prosecuted. The extent of this criminality is hard to over-exaggerate: there were thousands of victims and hundreds of perpetrators, and all the while, those in authority engaged in willful cover-ups, brash law-breaking, and the aggressive slander of accusers—all with utter impunity. Finally, the depth of this criminal network was exposed and the Catholic Church has been paying out billions of dollars in civil suits ever since. In 2003, the Boston Archdiocese paid over \$100 million to fund legal settlements to more than 500 abuse victims; in 2004, the diocese of Orange County, California, paid \$100 million to settle a sex abuse lawsuit brought by 87 plaintiffs, the Diocese of Sacramento, California, paid \$35 million to 33 victims, and the Diocese of Oakland, California, paid to pay \$56 million to 56 people; in 2006, the Archdiocese of Los Angeles paid \$60 million to settle 45 cases of alleged sexual abuse by priests; in 2007, the Los Angeles Archdiocese settled another 508 cases of alleged sexual abuse by priests for a record-breaking payout of \$660 million, and The Roman Catholic Diocese of San Diego, California, paid \$198 million to settle 144 claims of sexual abuse by clergy.²⁴ Many Americans, and many Catholics, were disgusted by this scandal. Not only were the actual sexual crimes themselves morally abhorrent, but the degree to which those in positions of power sought to cover-up these crimes, and allow them to continue, was truly, detestably shocking. As Barry Kosmin's data indicates, it took its toll: many Catholic Americans have fled the Catholic church and embraced the designation of “nonreligious” in the wake of the exposure of this scandal.²⁵

Reaction after 9/11

The rise of irreligion in this country certainly gained some traction in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Yes, people flocked to their houses of worship in the immediate

aftermath of 9/11;²⁶ however, this uptick in church attendance quickly fell back down to its lower levels, and the more long-term trend was one of distaste for religion, at least for some. In the 9/11 attacks, people saw an overtly immoral, savage act carried out in the name of Allah. It increased anti-Muslim sentiment, to be sure, but it also fostered a bit of a more generalized antireligious sentiment as well.

Growing Support for Gay Rights

In America today, there is only one public, overt, and concerted source of antihomosexual ideological and activity, and it is religion. There is no secular antigay movement out there. It is the religious—from African American pastors to Mormon bishops, from Evangelical think tanks to Muslim imams—that form a singular, pious chorus of antigay sentiment. Thus, as more and more Americans shed their homophobia, and come to support gay rights, they may be simultaneously souring on religion. The fact that Americans today between the ages of 18 and 30 years are the generation most accepting of homosexuality in the nation’s history, and are simultaneously those least interested in being religious, may certainly be spurious or coincidental, but I doubt it.

The Internet

The Internet has probably had a secularizing effect on American society in recent decades.²⁷ First off, religious people can look up their own religion on the web and suddenly—even unwittingly—be exposed to an array of critiques or blatant attacks on their tradition that they otherwise would have never come across. Debunking on the Internet abounds, and the web exposes the adherents of every and any religious tradition to skeptical views that can potentially undermine personal surety, rattling an otherwise insulated, confident conviction in one’s religion. Also, the Internet allows people who may be privately harboring doubts about their religion to immediately connect with others who also

share such doubts. In other words, the Internet fosters and spurs secular community.²⁸ Finally, and perhaps most subtly, the web may be partly responsible for the rise of irreligion simply by what it is, what it can do, what it can provide, how it functions, and how it interfaces with us and our minds, desires, and lives. The Internet may be supplying something psychological, or feeding something neurological, or establishing something cultural via its individual-computer screen nexus, something dynamic that is edging out religion, replacing religion, or weakening religion. The entertainment available on the Internet, the barrage of imagery, simultaneity, mental stimulation, looking and clicking, hunting and finding, time-wasting, consumerism, social networking, virtual communication—all of it may be undermining religion's ability to draw our interest, command our attention, and stir our soul.

Irreverent Impiety on Television

While the Christian Right's presence in America is certainly bolstered by its massive media empires, such as the Christian Broadcasting Network, and while religious programs on television are abundant, such as "The 700 Club," not to mention the ubiquity of religious programming on the radio—the fact still remains that in the last decade, several very popular television shows have been overt in their impiety, blatantly lampooning religious leaders, satirizing religious denominations, mocking religious people, and deriding religious beliefs. Prominent among these not-so-subtle secular shows are "South Park," "Family Guy," and "The Simpsons." We can also include Penn and Teller's "Bullshit!" On top of these extremely clever, extremely popular shows, we can add the irreverence of three very popular talk-show hosts: Jon Stewart, Bill Maher, and Stephen Colbert. These three men critique religion in various ways and they all offer a decidedly secular viewpoint, peppered with a lot of smart humor and biting scorn. In my opinion, these television shows have had a

culturally secularizing affect, especially on Americans under 30, who, as previously noted, happen to be those Americans least interested in religion.

Consequences—Politics and Public Life

What does this recent rise of the nones portend for American society in the years ahead? One likely consequence of the rise of irreligion in America will be a distinct weakening of the stigmatization that has, for so long, been attached to being nonreligious. As recent research indicates, atheists and other nonreligious people are not very well liked in the United States.²⁹ For example, 43% of Americans said that they would not vote for an atheist for president, putting atheists in last/worst place, behind Muslims (40% of Americans said they would not vote for a Muslim for president), homosexuals (30% would not), Mormons (18% would not), Latinos (7% would not), Jews (6% would not), Catholics (5% would not), women (5% would not), and African Americans (4% would not).³⁰ One study found that nearly half of all Americans would disapprove of their child wanting to marry an atheist, and when compared to other religious or minority groups such as African Americans, Mormons, Muslims, Latinos, etc.—“atheists are at the top of the list of groups that Americans find problematic.”³¹ Additional research has found that many Americans consider secular people to be selfish, immoral, and untrustworthy.³²

As more and more Americans shed their faith and come out about their atheism, agnosticism, and secular humanism, we can expect the negative stereotyping of nonreligious Americans to decrease. As more Americans come to learn that many of their acquaintances, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and family members do not believe in God, the notion that godlessness is tantamount to immorality will wither, the idea that one must be religious in order to be a good citizen will wilt, and the view that religion is necessary for a good life or a good society will become increasingly hard to sustain.

A second probable consequence of the rise of irreligion will be a more progressive America. Secularity and left-wing politics seem to go hand in hand; the rejection of religion is strongly and consistently correlated with left-leaning, progressive, or radical political views. Secular people are, on average, more liberal or progressive than their religious peers, being less likely to support the death penalty, less likely to support the War in Iraq, less likely to support the governmental use of torture, and more likely to support women's equality, gay rights, and the legalization of marijuana.³³ Nonreligious Americans are much more likely to support Democratic candidates for president. For example, in the 2000 election, 61% of nonreligious Americans voted for Gore; in 2004, 67% voted for Kerry; in 2008, 75% voted for Obama; in 2012, 70% voted for Obama.³⁴ According to the American Religious Identification Survey of 2008, only 12% of "nones" are registered Republicans.

To be sure, not every nonbeliever is politically liberal—for example, Ayn Rand—but the vast majority are.³⁵ So the rising rate of secularity in America will bode well for the Democratic party, and for progressive causes, especially when it comes to supporting gay marriage, keeping abortion safe and legal, and combatting global warming. Furthermore, many studies show that secular people are less likely to be racist than their secular peers.³⁶ Maybe this recent rise of irreligion will help erode racism within American culture as well.

A third consequence of the growth of secularity will most likely be an increase of individualism within American society, as well as a weakening sense of community—or at least the traditional sense of community, which for most Americans, has typically been religious in nature. At the very heart or core of being secular, at least for many nonreligious people, is a degree of suspicion toward communal dictates and group conformity. Recent psychological studies indicate that atheists and agnostics tend to value the autonomy of the individual rather than loyal bonds to a collective,³⁷ that nonbelievers tend to be less social, less conformist, and more

individualistic than believers, on average,³⁸ and religious believers tend to have personalities that value or are attracted to things like tradition, security, and in-group loyalty, while secular nonbelievers are usually people who are “individualist, open-minded, and nonconformist” and “less in need of social support.”³⁹ A recent Pew study found that while nearly 50% of all Americans say that belonging to a community of like-minded people is very important to them, only 28% of nonreligious Americans say as much.⁴⁰ With its emphasis on increased personal autonomy and the right of individuals to fashion their own life course, American secularity really is a manifestation of individualism.⁴¹ As Georgetown University Professor Jacques Berlinerblau has quipped, “secularism has a ‘we’ problem. Secularists don’t do ‘we.’”⁴²

Not being big on “we” can certainly have its disadvantages. Many studies show that, on average, people who belong to and are regular participants in religious congregations live longer than those who are not religiously involved⁴³ and they also suffer less from depression.⁴⁴ They report higher levels of subjective well-being⁴⁵ and they are also more charitable and generous.⁴⁶ So the rise of secularity—being a matter of increased individualism and decreased participation in traditional communities—may take its toll on many Americans, both psychologically and socially. Whether or not secular Americans will construct alternative communal options, such as humanist congregations or other forms or manifestations of secular social bonding to replace religion, remains to be seen.

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