

The Secularization Project

From time to time, The Secularization Project will publish précis of important books and articles assisting the study of our experience of secularization. This first précis originally appeared in The CARA Report – Summer 2021 and is reproduced here with permission.

Understanding the “Nones”

The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going, by Ryan P. Burge, was published in 2021 by Fortress Press (fortresspress.com).

Ryan P. Burge’s new book, *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going*, is principally based on data from the biennial General Social Survey (GSS), which began tracking American religious affiliation in 1972. Burge, a professor at Eastern Illinois University and the pastor of a Baptist church, is a frequent commentator on the growth in the U.S. population of those who claim no religious affiliation, known as “nones.”

The book’s first chapter addresses the seven principal religious traditions identified by scholars of American religion. Each is described in broad strokes that track changes in size over the past four and a half decades. The second chapter explains why the number of religiously unaffiliated has grown in the United States, including discussion of social science theories, issues with survey methodology, and the rise of the Internet. The remainder of the book outlines the three types of religious nones: atheists, agnostics, and those who identify as nothing in particular. The book ends with a discussion of the future of American religion, the aim of which is “to direct pastors and denominational leaders to think about ways to respond to the rise of the nones by understanding which factors can’t be changed and which ones can.”

The rise of the nones may be seen as a zero-sum game, in that every increase in that category means a decrease in the numbers of adherents to other religious traditions. This is reflected in the changes in the American religious landscape between 1972 and 2018, as follows.

- Evangelical Protestants, from 17 percent in 1972 to 29.9 percent in 1993 to 21.5 percent in 2018
- Mainline Protestants, from 27.9 percent in 1972 to 30.8 percent in 1976 to 9.9 percent in 2018
- Black Protestants, from 9 percent in 1972 to 9.3 percent in the mid-1980s to 6.2 percent in 2018
- Catholics, from 27.3 percent in 1972 and mid-2000s to 23.1 percent in 2018
- Jews, from 3 percent in 1972 to 1.7 percent in 2018
- Other Faith Traditions, from 3.9 percent in 1972 to 6.2 percent in 2018
- Nones, from 5.1 percent in 1972 to 23.7 percent in 2018. GSS does not distinguish among types of nones, who are estimated at about one-quarter each atheist and agnostic and one-half nothing in particular.

The description of today's Catholics is summarized as follows: While the American Catholic Church had been overwhelmingly white for centuries, that is changing rapidly. In 2018, one-quarter of all U.S. Catholics were nonwhite, and that share could grow exponentially in the coming decades as white birth rates slow compared to those of nonwhites. The Catholic share of the population was surprisingly stable from 1972 until the mid-2000s, when it hovered between 25 and 27 percent, then declined to 23.1 percent in 2018. While it would be unwise to pin this drop on any one cause, Burge believes it is impossible to ignore the Church's sex abuse crisis as a factor. It is also noteworthy that the share of Catholics who say they never attend church services doubled from 7 percent in 1973 to 14.3 percent in 2016.

Among the many factors examined as likely contributors to the rapid shift in numbers from organized religion to nothing in particular, one of the most important may be that religion is no longer passed down the family line simply by tradition or osmosis. Another is that in the past, for the sake of respectability, most Americans felt they were expected to be members of a faith community; this notion has declined over time, so that people who were previously low- or non-participating Christians may now comfortably describe themselves as nothing in particular. This category is not confined to young people but runs the gamut: Ages 18–29 (27.6 percent), 30s (18.8 percent), 40s (16.6 percent), 50s (17.3 percent), 60s (13.6 percent), over 70 (6.3 percent).

As to why the religiously unaffiliated are now almost 24 percent of the population, Burge speculates: "While secularization might have put the pieces in place for America's disaffiliation, I think what accelerated the shift were changes in politics, fueled in no small part by the introduction of the Internet." He points out that something unmistakable happened in the early 1990s. "While the nones were slowly trending upward to this point, their rise accelerated dramatically around 1995. The biggest religious trend occurring at that moment was the rise of evangelicalism and the religious right." At that time, "the loudest and most numerous voices in Protestant Christianity became more theologically and politically conservative, [and] that drove off a lot of moderates."

He concludes: "The reality is simply this: Americans used to be Christians by default, not because of their belief in the words of the Apostles' Creed. Secularization merely gave permission for a lot of people to express who they truly are—religiously unaffiliated." What, then, is to be done? The author has two suggestions: The first is to recognize that God is not a Republican or a Democrat, so pastors should strive to reduce the political polarization in their churches, since many believers who have strayed for this reason may still want to be part of a Christian community. The other, based on Burge's training and experience as a pastor, echoes the words of the apostle Paul to the church in Galatia: "So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up."

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