Exploring Motivations for Identifying as a Religious None

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Abstract

Individuals that identify as “religious nones” are on the rise in the United States. When such individuals that identify as atheistic or agnostic are removed, a puzzling question remains: if one still has faith, why not identify with a particular religion? A variety of reasons and motivations can be identified when various experiments, surveys, and sociological research works are analyzed. Broadly, these motivations fall into three categories: psychological, social, and political. These three are tightly connected and interwoven, often depending on each other and feeding into each other. Analyzing these motivations provides insight into how religious nones think and what might be expected from them in the future.

Motivations for Identifying as a Religious None

Across cultures, the role of religion has become a source of contention. Some nations actively embrace religion as part of government and daily life, and some use it as a tool to destroy and subvert any opposition. In the United States, these debates continue to wage on within court systems, within legislation, and within the home. Despite these arguments, and a perceived shift toward secularism, young Americans actually claim to be more religious or spiritual now than ever. The influx of immigrants in recent decades has brought a plethora of new and diverse ideas on what religion is and should/could be.

This increase in exposure to other religious and cultural ideologies has given American youths greater choice in religion and has had profound effects on both the perception and choice of religion by young Americans. As early as the age of five, children begin to associate with others of similar or identical beliefs (Heiphetz, Spelke, & Banaji, 2014, p. 25). In fact, research has shown that children between the ages of six and nine are capable of judging the mental states of others (Heiphetz, Spelke, & Banaji, 2014, p. 26). At this age, these beliefs are largely dependent upon the beliefs and values of the parents (Sherkat & Wilson, 1995, p. 996). As they age, however, children undergo a subtle shift in beliefs and often begin to individualize their religious or spiritual preferences. During this phase, children, who are likely adolescents by this time, perform increasingly complex analyses of the beliefs and values of others (Heiphetz, Spelke, & Banaji, 2014, p. 25).

Before exploring the trends, it is necessary to clarify the terms presented here. “Young Americans” refers to Americans between the ages of 15 and 30. “Rigid” defines religions with prescribed rituals, behaviors, and activities that are enforced and required for membership. Conversely, religions with less structure contain a central tenant or set of doctrines, but largely leave the interpretation of other aspects to the individual. The terms “nones” and “religious nones” are equivalent, and are distinct from individuals that identify as agnostic or atheistic. The examination of trends operates under the assumption that young Americans are raised either in Christian homes or by parents that where raised in Christian homes. The potential effects of differing beginning religions is not explored, in order to simplify the evaluations.

Recent years have shown increasing numbers of American youths choosing to shun affiliation with any religion or to affiliate only loosely, even with so-called liberal religious institutions. Such individuals are termed “nones” and have their largest demographic representation among adults under 30. In fact, one-third of US adults under 30 identify as having no religious affiliation (Pew, 2012).

In general, an exploration and evaluation of literature, including experiments and surveys, indicates three broad categories which motivate individuals to declare themselves as religious nones: psychological, social, and political. Each category is closely tied to the others, yet each has its own unique reasoning and motivation.

**Psychological**

A common assumption regarding religious nones is that they are totally devoid of religious affiliation or faith (Pew, 2012). This, however, is untrue. In fact, the majority of religious nones continue to claim a belief in God, continue praying, or, at the very least, identify as spiritual (Hout & Fischer, 2002, p. 173; Pew, 2012). In short, religious nones retain much of their faith despite their disassociation from organized religious entities. Although uncommon, another term applied to religious nones is “unchurched,” referring to their continued faith but lack of direct affiliation with a religious organization (Tamney, Powell, & Johnson, 1989, p. 227).

Almost all nones state that they pray, although the frequency of prayers varies, as does the entity to whom they choose to pray (Hout & Fischer, 2002, p. 175). Most nones do affiliate with the Christian God, but there are many who pray to a more personal deity or deities from non-Judeo-Christian faiths. Overwhelmingly, nones avoid the term “religious;” rather, they identify as “spiritual” (Hout & Fischer, 2002, p. 176). This indicates a preference for appearing to be more individualized and separate from mainstream ideology. Accordingly, the interest of American adolescents and young adults in spirituality has begun to increase exponentially (Smith, Lundquist, Faris, & Regnerus, 2002, p. 610).

Furthermore, some studies have found a correlation between age and religious participation; participation decreases with age (Smith, Lundquist, Faris, & Regnerus, 2002, p. 605). While this does not categorize such individuals as being without any religious preference or faith, it is indicative of a greater tendency to disassociate from organized religious institutions. This is especially relevant when one considers that the rise of nones implies a decline in the importance of religious traditions, but not necessarily of religion itself (Condran & Tamney, 1985, p. 415).

**Social**

The social motivations behind declaring oneself a none are perhaps the most extensive and most obvious. Various models predict that, with time, society will become increasingly secularized. However, the data showing that nones retain their faith and belief in God implies that such a theory is invalid (Hout & Fischer, 2002, p. 173). The majority of nones believe that religion can be a force for good in society (Pew, 2012). In fact, 63% of nones say that a decline of the importance of religion to daily life is a negative occurrence (Pew, 2012).

The demographic information of religious nones reveals various social motives for identifying as such. The majority of nones are college-educated or in the process of attaining a college education (Condran & Tamney, 1985, p. 416; Loveland, 2003, p. 148; Pew, 2012), have greater mobility, are single/unmarried, young, and are from urban areas (Condran & Tamney, 1985, p. 416; Tamney, Powell, & Johnson, 1989, p. 217).

In short, individuals with more opportunity and exposure tend to identify as nones (Tamney, Powell, & Johnson, 1989, p. 217). This also correlates to a time in life when individuals are “finding themselves,” represented by expanding social circles during college and wrestling with the idea of what one wishes to spend his or her life doing. It is especially important to note the cultural effects on this trend. Western culture upholds individuality, which may promote religious disassociation as a form of self-identification (Tamney, Powell, & Johnson, 1989, p. 226).

In fact, while nones often continue praying, they tend not to participate in other ritual aspects of religion. Rituals, in any setting, serve to foster a sense of community (Loeb, 2014, p. 515). Losing these rituals, therefore, helps to form a more individualized concept of self, detached from large-scale or group behaviors, which are more easily recognized in a religious setting.

Further demographic analyses shows a schism between nones, resulting in two general categories of nones. This schism relates to class. Lower-class individuals actually tend to prefer the more strict practices and organizations (Sherkat & Wilson, 1995, p. 994). In contrast, upper-class individuals, particularly if they are intellectuals, prefer greater freedom and individual expression with regard to religion (Sherkat & Wilson, 1995, p. 995). The former category, comprised of lower-class or working-class individuals, can be labeled as structural nones (Condran & Tamney, 1985, p. 416). The latter category, comprised of upper-class individuals and so-called intellectuals, can be labeled as cultural nones (Condran & Tamney, 1985, p. 416).

Another intriguing social trend is that of young adults postponing marriage and the start of their own families (Pew, 2012). Historically, a pattern has established itself for this period of life. Individuals detach from religion when they leave the family in which they were raised, but reattach themselves to religion when they start their own families (Hout & Fischer, 2002, p. 167). In fact, this has characterized even large social movements, such as the hippies of the 1960s and 1970s. Some argue that this is merely an extension of adolescent rebellion against parental control, which eventually fades as youths become adults and face their own challenges as parents (Hout & Fischer, 2002, p. 168). Such individuals return to religion, at the very least, to provide a framework for teaching their children morals and ethics.

Interestingly, individuals identifying themselves as religious nones tend to have fewer family social ties, but more social ties outside of the family (Hout & Fischer, 2002, p. 176). Even in social circumstances totally unrelated to religion directly, this holds true. Nones are more likely to see movies, go out to dine, vacation, or attend other social gatherings with individuals to whom they are not related than with their relatives. This has interesting implications for the ways in which nones perceive the role of religion in the family. As previously stated, at least among younger nones, this may be a continued manifestation of rebellion against parental control and the continued struggle to establish a concept of self-identity and expression.

This tendency allows the formation of various social bonds that might not have existed, or that such individuals perceive would not have existed, before disassociating from religious organizations (Sherkat & Wilson, 1995, p. 995). Indeed, many researches and sociologists have noted that people will often make choices relating to religion that please others (Loveland, 2003, p. 149). This tendency, however, may be bi-directional. Just as nones may select and form new relationships based on their changed ideology, it is also possible that they chose to become nones because of changes in their social relationships. Again, this links into the age and education demographic, and implies a possibility of peer pressure as a deciding factor.

The adolescent and young adult period also displays a greater fraction of individuals who switch from one religion to another (Smith, Lundquist, Faris, & Regnerus, 2002, p. 597). In fact, more than one-fourth of American adults left the religion they were raised with for another religion or denomination (Sheppard, 2008, p. B11). Not all of these individuals became religious nones, but such data is indicative, at the very least, of a lateral mobility among religions that could lead to identification as a none.

However, such changes are less likely in so-called “fringe” churches, which are often unique even within a specific denomination (Loveland, 2003, p. 148). One explanation of such unique groups retaining membership is that their teachings are just different enough from mainstream churches that they do not target the same niches (Loveland, 2003, p. 155). It is even possible that such churches intentionally target different social groups to avoid losing members to similar ideologies. Religious switching is also common when the religion or denomination an individual switches to is perceived to be more open and welcoming (Anderson, 2010).

This membership retention might also relate back to the theme of individuality; these unique or “fringe” churches are sufficiently different from mainstream churches and/or society that they create a platform for self-identification without disassociation. A similar trend presents in the southern United States, which have both the lowest percentage of religious nones and the lowest percentage of religious switching in the country (Smith, Lundquist, Faris, & Regnerus, 2002, p. 607).

**Political**

The political motivations of identifying as a none are nearly as equally complex and varied as the social motivations. First and foremost, as previously stated, many nones continue to maintain at least a basic level of faith. Their true quarrel is with the individuals in charge of the organized churches, not necessarily with the beliefs themselves or God (Hout & Fischer, 2002, p. 178). In fact, some religions, such as the Bahai’I faith, believe that societal changes make it difficult to keep highly organized religions applicable to modern life (Ondeck, 2003, p. 172). The rise of such religions, which generally allow their members freedom to live as they choose within a specified set of tenants, is indicative of the potential for large political groups to be created and compete with more traditional religious organizations. It is also indicative that nones may be able to join together in creating their own churches, thus continuing the evolution of religion and its role in the United States.

The majority of nones feel that religious organizations are too involved with politics (Pew, 2012). Specifically, they state that churches are too focused on money/power, rules, and political agendas (Pew, 2012). This manifests as part of a general trend in modern American society of distrust in organized macro-entities (Anderson, 2010; Sheppard, 2008, p. B11). This distrust has actually begun to spread across generations.

Throughout the history of the United States, religion has served as a springboard for many political movements (Hout & Fischer, 2002, p. 179). Abolition, populism, the progressive era, and the Civil Rights Movement all had strong religious backings on both sides. Various current political disputes, foremost among them abortion and gay marriage, continue to exhibit this trend. In fact, they have begun to divide religious institutions themselves. The actions of various extremists within these organizations result in a growing distrust of the leadership within the organizations.

Religious organizations tend to identify with conservative and Republican political agendas (Hout & Fischer, 2002, p. 168). During the 1990s, the “Religious Right” began to identify so strongly with such political agendas that moderate and liberal members of churches disassociated from religious entities entirely (Hout & Fischer, 2002, p. 185). This action increased as religious leaders gained prominence amongst conservative political leaders, often serving in both roles.

In fact, this political disparity can be labeled as another cause for the creation of structural and cultural nones, in addition to class incentives. Structural nones predominated prior to 1960, largely in response to dissatisfaction over the social and political roles of churches (Tamney, Powell, & Johnson, 1989, p. 218). Because structural nones often come from lower- or working-class social categories, churches were often viewed as “pro-management” and “anti-worker.”

In contrast, cultural nones began to predominate from 1960 onward. Such individuals had begun to accept new and/or different moral ideas, thus feeling estranged from mainstream religion (Tamney, Powell, & Johnson, 1989, p. 218). These individuals desired a freer religious oversight, which would allow them to pursue various interests and debate the merits and/or importance these interests. These individuals are generally upper-class because they have had access to higher education, where many of these ideas are first introduced and debated. As such education becomes more available and affordable, the identity of the “cultural none” will trickle down into the working class.

**Effects on Society**

The increasing proportion of Americans that identify as religious nones has far-reaching effects. Politically, the withdrawal from religious affiliation of liberals and moderates could result in the use of new philosophies to uphold moral and ethical ideas. The loss of membership may also result in ever greater activism by conservative religious organizations in an attempt to target and recruit individuals that identify with their political agendas.

Perhaps the most significant effect is on the churches themselves. Protestant churches tend to lose more members than Catholic churches, largely to the “none” self-identification (Pew, 2012). In order to combat this, Protestant churches attempt to counter the motivations behind identifying as a religious none. Chiefly, this is manifested in youth groups. Half of all youths participate in a religious youth group (Smith, Lundquist, Faris, & Regnerus, 2002, p. 602). Youth groups have become increasingly social in nature in recent decades and are more prevalent among Protestant churches than Catholic churches (Smith, Lundquist, Faris, & Regnerus, 2002, p. 602).

Rather than focusing on religious dogma and education, youth groups attempt to create a sense of being moral without necessarily needing religion. This has a strong undertone of the individuality theme discussed previously. Because youth group participants are largely adolescents, this is very appealing to them and serves to increase the likelihood of their staying within the church or a church very similar to it.

The increase of religious nones who maintain faith and identify as spiritual indicates that religion will continue to play an important role in daily life, but in a new way. Rather than focus on rituals and dogma, religion will become individualized and evolve into a set of moral precepts and codes. It may, in the future, be possible for such individuals to identify others with identical beliefs and create new churches or similar organizations. It is perhaps possible that this will result in a new cycle of rising religious influence, religious political involvement, and then disassociation from religion as a form of self-identity. Similar patterns have arisen and been repeated in the past, resulting in further breakup of religious institutions and moving toward more individualized ideologies.

References

Anderson, K. [Keith Anderson]. (2010, August 30). *Why Lutheran?* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvE49kbdpmc

Bishop Mark Hanson of the ECLA discusses why so many, especially young, Americans have converted to evangelical Lutheran ideology. It cites the distrust in highly organized institutions by young Americans. References to a more open, understanding doctrine are mentioned (possible attempt to target young Americans).

Condran, J.G. & Tamney, J.B. (1985). Religious ‘nones’: 1957 to 1982. *Sociological Analysis, 46*(4), 415-423.

Attempts to explain the occurrence of religious nones. It names two types of nones, structural and cultural. Context is also provided for historical periods, from which one can extract theories on changes in religious structures targeting such groups.

Heiphetz, L., Spelke, E. S., & Banaji, M. R. (2014). The formation of belief-based social preferences. *Social Cognition, 32*(1), 22-47. doi:http://dx.doi.org/101521soco201432122

A series of experiments on children looking at how similarity of beliefs affects social grouping/preferences. This provides evidence that religion becomes key early in life to creating a social identity, especially in relation to groups. It allows for an exploration of how a broader, less rigid and exclusive religious structure would allow for an expanded social circle.

Hout, M. & Fischer, C.S. (2002). Why more Americans have no religious preference: Politics and generations. *American Sociological Review, 67*(2), 165-190.

Discusses the sharp increase in religious nones. It explores what may have caused this increase. The findings can be paired with ideas on structure and how it influences preferences.

Loeb, L. (2014). Call and response: An anatomy of religious practice. *Discourse Studies, 16*(4), 514-533. doi: 10.1177/1461445613519020

Argues for the necessity of understanding the structure and dynamics of religious rituals. Extrapolation from the rituals to general rigor of structure can be drawn to create inferences of how structure affects preference. It discusses the link of structure to personal experience.

Loveland, M.T. (2003). Religious switching: Preference development, maintenance, and change. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 42*(1), 147-157. doi: 10.1111/1468-5906.00168

Discusses trends in changing religions in the US. The article specifically discusses how preferences may change. Less rigid structure may create a more communal feel because more distinctive denominations reduce the probability of switching.

Ondeck, D.M. (2003). Baha’l religion. *Home Health Care Management and Practice, 15*(2), 172-173. doi: 10.1177/1084822302239311

Gives a brief overview of the Baha’l religion. Baha’l expresses the idea that highly organized religion becomes less useful as society changes and adapts over time. The religion is a model of a religious adaptation to cater to a decrease in perceived need for rigid structure.

Pew Research Forum. (2012, 9 October). *“Nones” on the rise*. Retrieved from http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/#

Discusses various surveys that indicate the increase of religious nones in the United States. Covers the demographic backgrounds and political views of the nones, as well as possible motivations for identifying as a religious none.

Sheppard, H. (2008, March 1). Americans switching religious affiliations. *Los Angeles Daily News,* p. B11

Discusses a survey of US religion. Changing religions, or just denominations within a religion, are documented as increasing for adult Americans. It also notes the increasing distrust of large institutionalized organizations.

Sherkat, D.E. & Wilson, J. (1995). Preferences, constraints, and choices in religious markets: An examination of religious switching and apostasy. *Social Forces, 73*(3), 993.

A study exploring religious preferences and their influence on religious mobility. Religion is viewed as a sort of marketplace. This model allows for the expression of structure in terms of competing entities.

Smith, C., Lundquist Denton, M., Faris, R., & Regnerus, M. (2002). Mapping American adolescent religious participation. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 41*(4), 597-612.

Explores how American adolescents participate in religion. Youth group participation is one focus, allowing for the exploration of how churches have targeted young Americans. Their choice of participation also reflects their preferences of structure.

Tamney, J.B., Powell, S., & Johnson, S. (1989). Innovation theory and religious nones. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 28*(2), 216-229. doi: 10.2307/1387060

Examines the motivations of religious nones through the lens of innovation theory. It explores what leads to claiming no religious affiliation. This provides possible support and alternate explanations of structural preference.