

**THE
RISE
OF THE
NONES**

*UNDERSTANDING AND REACHING
THE RELIGIOUSLY UNAFFILIATED*

JAMES EMERY WHITE



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Introduction

This is a book on the rise of the “*nones*,” now the fastest-growing religious group in America. These religiously unaffiliated people have always been with us, of course, but their new classification and the vast numbers who have flocked to their nonlabel label in just a few short years have been breathtaking.

This book is divided into two parts. The first part is an analysis of the rise of the *nones*, with a look at the rise itself, the characteristics of the average *none*, why the *nones* are on the rise, the broader cultural context of our post-Christian world and its relationship to the rise, and the various beliefs present among the religiously unaffiliated. In short, the first section will give you the cultural analysis needed to understand the who, what, and why of the rise of the *nones*.

I write not simply as a professor of theology and culture who is attempting to investigate a new cultural phenomenon, but also as a pastor; so this discussion is far from academic. For the last two decades I have led a church that targets the religiously unaffiliated in all of its outreach. To date, over 70 percent of our total growth has come from the previously unchurched. I know that is a staggeringly high number, but it has been the dynamic of our church from its inception. So I write not only as one who has been reaching out to the *nones* for over twenty years, but also as one who has seen firsthand how that outreach is now having to change.

That brings me to the second part of the book, which is an overview of the new mentality and approach that is needed to connect with the rising tide of the religiously unaffiliated and not only reach them for Christ, but also involve them in the life of the church. But do not expect a list of tips and techniques; what is called for is nothing less than a revolution of mindset and strategy.

Finally, I've provided two appendices that feature two talks delivered at Mecklenburg Community Church (Meck). One of the most frequent questions following conferences and seminars is, "Okay, I get this. So how do you actually talk to a *none*? What would a sermon attempting to reach out to them sound like and feel like?" The two talks are indicative of how one could address some of the key concerns present among the *nones*.

The two parts of this book remind me of something I once read about the late Francis Schaeffer. Someone questioned him about his engagement of culture in relation to apologetics, asking whether he was an evidentialist or a presuppositionalist.

Schaeffer thought a moment and said, "Actually, I think I'm just an old-fashioned evangelist." And that is what, in the end, I am. And what I hope, in the end, this book affords others to be as well.



PART 1

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1

The Rise of the *Nones*

A recent issue of *Foreign Policy* magazine was focused around its first-ever set of predictions about the future. Articles from some of the world’s most “bleeding-edge” thinkers looked ahead at the planet in the year 2025.

As you can imagine, most of their predictions have already been set in motion by recent events and could easily have been predicted. For example, technology will take on a life of its own; micromulti-nationals will run the world; everything will be too big to fail; the South China Sea will be the future of conflict; the world will be more crowded (but with older people); the shape of the global economy will fundamentally change; and problems will be increasingly global in nature, as will their solutions.

What intrigued me the most, however, was a submission titled “Megatrends That Weren’t.”¹ Joshua Keating took a careful look at “Yesterday’s Next Big Things” that have yet to take place, concluding that “history can be awfully unkind to pundits wielding crystal balls.” As his examples show, today’s “Next Big Thing” can quickly become tomorrow’s “Trend That Never Was.” For example:

The Japanese Superpower. In the 1980s and early '90s, as Japan's industrial production surged by more than 50 percent, a cottage industry predicting Japan's economic dominance was born. Instead, Japan entered its *lost decade* of economic stagnation and was overtaken by China in 2010.

The Permanent Economic Boom. Prior to the current financial crisis, there was unbridled optimism that the good times don't have to end. Experts placed inordinate faith in the power of computerized trading, financial innovation, and the exploding housing market. The reality is that even by 2013, the Dow Jones Industrial Average has never fared significantly better than its then 2007 peak of 14,164.53. So much for predictions of the Dow reaching 36,000, 40,000, or even 100,000, as some predicted.

Peak Oil. While there is a finite amount of oil in the world and it's going to run out sooner or later, it was predicted that global oil production would tap out in the early 1970s. Peak-oil theorists failed to take into account both the discovery of new oil and new means of extracting difficult-to-recover reserves buried deep beneath the ocean or in tar sands in the Canadian tundra.

The Resource Crunch. In 1798, English scholar Thomas Malthus predicted that global famine and disease would eventually limit human population growth. As of the time of this writing, we are now more than 7 billion and growing without imminent global famine and catastrophe due to rapid population growth. There may come a time when the earth's population becomes unsustainable, but for now the problem isn't a lack of resources but how to distribute them to those in need.

The Internet Fad. Excessive skepticism can be as bad as buying into overly optimistic predictions. In 1943 IBM Chairman Thomas Watson saw a global market for "maybe five computers." Then there's astronomer and popular science author Clifford Stoll, who in a 1995 book and *Newsweek* article ridiculed the idea that "we'll soon buy books and newspapers straight over the Internet" and argued that "no online database will replace your daily newspaper." And more recently, British entrepreneur Alan Sugar predicted in 2005 that the iPod would be "kaput" within the year.

But there is one prediction that recently has been supported with multiple stunning confirmations that few dispute: the future religious landscape of America will be increasingly dominated by the *nones*.

The ARIS Shock

The first indication of this new reality was evidenced by the headlines surrounding the results of the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS):²

“Almost All Denominations Losing Ground: Faith Is Shifting, Drifting or Vanishing Outright” (*USA Today*)³

“We’re Losing Our Religion” (Associated Press)⁴

“America Becoming Less Christian” (CNN.com)⁵

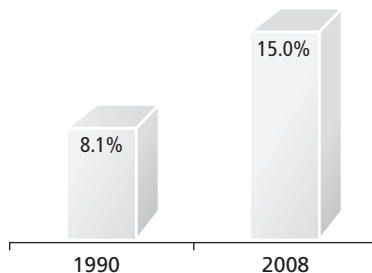
“US Religion ID Inching to ‘None’” (*Seattle Times*)⁶

“None of Thee Above” (Religion News Service)⁷

Much in the study was to be expected: mainlines are losing ground; the Bible Belt is less Baptist; Catholics have invaded the South; denominationalism is on the wane. What generated the headlines was the increase in a category few had previously discussed: the *nones*.

What are the *nones*? The short answer is that they are the religiously unaffiliated. When asked about their religion, they did not answer “Baptist” or “Catholic” or any other defined faith. They picked a new category: *none*.

Percentage of Americans Claiming No Religious Identity



The ARIS survey found that the *nones* nearly doubled from a 1990 survey to 2008, from 8.1 percent to 15 percent, making those who claimed no religion at all the third-largest defined constituency in the United States. Only Catholics and Baptists represented larger groups. Further, *nones* were the only religious bloc to rise in percentage in every single state, thus constituting the only true national religious trend. The official ARIS report, titled “American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population,” found that the 1990s was the decade when the “secular boom” occurred. During that era alone, each year 1.3 million more adult Americans joined the ranks of the *nones*.⁸

But the *nones* weren’t done booming.

Souls in Transition

The next confirmation that a sea change was underway came when Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, released another slice of ARIS findings.⁹ It is important to note that findings from ARIS have, by necessity, come in doses. Done in 1990 with more than 113,000 people, again in 2001, and then again in 2008 with more than 54,000 people, it was one of the largest demographic polls in history and perhaps the largest survey of American religions to date.

The headline? Gen Xers, as they age, are bucking all conventional wisdom and not returning to the religious fold. This was newsworthy because of the long-held view that young people raised in the church may sow a few wild oats, drift away from the compulsory attendance inflicted by their parents, but then return once they marry and begin having children. That’s the way it worked with baby boomers—after all, Woodstock alums had led to the development of Willow Creek, then the largest church in North America. So there was little concern when Millennials left the church in droves once they became independent from their parents.

But that isn’t what is happening. “The ARIS study seems to challenge what has been a core truth of American demographics: That people become more politically conservative and religiously affiliated as they age. . . . Everything we find here is counterintuitive,” reflects Barry Kosmin, an author of the study.¹⁰

This new reality of the “young and unchurched” becoming the “older and unchurched” is in line with the results from the National Study of Youth and Religion, initially conducted from 2001 to 2005 and arguably the largest research project on the religious and spiritual lives of American adolescents. The first round of results was analyzed in a groundbreaking work titled *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Teenagers*. When they were no longer teenagers but “emerging adults” between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three, a new release of results—titled *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*—revealed the findings of the study as it entered its next phase.¹¹ (Note that the word *emerging* here has nothing to do with the emergent church or emergent movement; instead it refers to their relationship with adulthood—they are making their way into adulthood in a stretched-out, prolonged manner.) Among these emerging adults are six major religious types:

1. committed traditionalists (no more than 15 percent)
2. selective adherents (perhaps 30 percent)
3. spiritually open (about 15 percent)
4. religiously indifferent (at least 25 percent)
5. religiously disconnected (no more than 5 percent)
6. irreligious (no more than 10 percent)

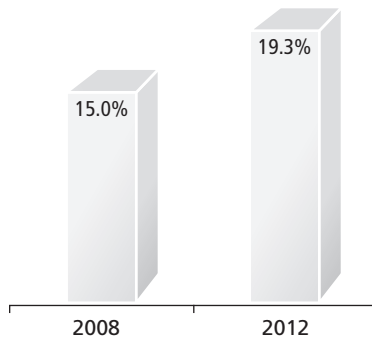
While only 15 percent would be committed to any type of religious faith, 25 percent are indifferent, another 5 percent disconnected, and another 10 percent completely irreligious. That’s 40 percent of all emerging adults clearly distanced from religion.

The largest group, the religiously indifferent, “neither care to practice religion nor to oppose it. They are simply not invested in religion either way.”¹² If they had a motto, it would be: “It just doesn’t matter that much.” To them, “religion has a status on the relevance structures or priority lists . . . similar to . . . the oil refinery industry.”¹³ Yet indifference was not relegated to this group. In truth, indifference permeated all of the categories in one form or another.

The Rise of the Nones

The rise of the *nones* did not get our full attention until the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life weighed in with their most recent study. Titled “Nones on the Rise,” the study found that one in five Americans (19.3 percent) now claim no religious identity.

Percentage of Americans Claiming No Religious Identity

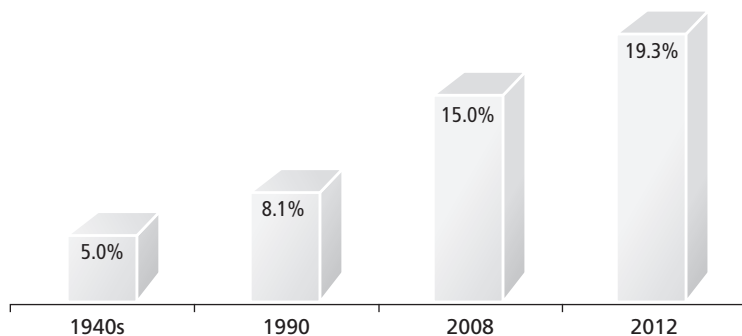


Among the unaffiliated are more than 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics, which is nearly 6 percent of the U.S. public, as well as nearly 33 million people who say they have no particular religious affiliation (14 percent).¹⁴ This puts the United States in close proximity to the U.K., where the *nones* constitute 25 percent of the population.¹⁵ The Pew study also found that Protestant Christianity no longer constitutes the majority in the United States, declining from 53 percent to 48 percent since 2007 alone. For perspective, it was as high as two out of every three Americans in the 1960s. These findings were later supported by a team of sociologists from the University of California, Berkeley, and Duke University who analyzed data on religious attitudes as part of the General Social Survey, a highly cited annual poll conducted by an independent research institute at the University of Chicago.¹⁶

To put this in perspective, consider that the number of *nones* in the 1930s and '40s hovered around 5 percent. By 1990 that number had only risen to 8 percent, a mere 3 percent rise in over half a century.¹⁷ Between 1990 and 2008—just eighteen years—the number of *nones* leaped from 8.1 percent to 15 percent. Then, in just four short years, it climbed to 20 percent, representing one of every five Americans. Even more telling

was the discovery in the National Study of Youth and Religion that a third of U.S. adults under the age of thirty don't identify with a religion.

Percentage of Americans Claiming No Religious Identity



So where have the *nones* gone? Nowhere. There is no shift from Protestant Christianity to another religious brand. Instead, there is simply the abandonment of a defined religion altogether. Those who previously were simply “unchurched,” or who had infrequent attendance, are now dropping religious attachments completely. Given the choice to label themselves as “nothing” instead of “something,” they prefer “nothing.”

The *nones* now make up the nation’s fastest-growing and second-largest religious category, eclipsed only by Catholics, outnumbering even Southern Baptists, the largest Protestant denomination.

Should We Be That Concerned?

To be sure, there are those who say this is nothing to be overly alarmed about. Some, such as church growth consultant Charles Arn, dismiss it as being little more than a rejection of institutional affiliation, and that nearly every membership-based organization is losing members. As a result, it’s not a spiritual issue at all.

Others, such as sociologist Christian Smith, leader of the National Study of Youth and Religion, agree it’s not quite a “sea change from seriously religious to unbelieving,” yet still see it as a “longer-term distancing of some from any association with religious faith and practice,

which is significant.” While arguing from similar Gallup polls for a slightly slower rise among the unaffiliated than the Pew findings indicate, Frank Newport from Gallup still calls it an “important shift”—but most do not hedge their bets.

“This is a big story,” says Clyde Wilcox, professor at Georgetown University. David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, says, “This is a major trend in American religion.”¹⁸ Dan Gilgoff, outgoing Religion Editor at CNN, makes the following assertion as he reflects on his tenure: “The explosion of people with no religion will be a huge story in this century, and the news media have only begun to explore its many implications.” He says the press has yet to dig into “countless other stories about making meaning, tradition, and ethics in a post-religious existence.”¹⁹

One dynamic that clearly tempers the results is that this trend is only an American phenomenon, not a global one. After a century-long decline, global religious affiliation is now on the rise, with Africa and China experiencing the most dramatic religious change. According to Todd Johnson, director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, globally only 12 percent claimed no religious affiliation in 2010, compared to 20 percent in 1970. But this growth is coming from the south, not the north. Christians in the Global North comprised 80 percent of all Christians in 1920 but today make up less than 40 percent. In Africa alone, Christian affiliation has risen from 9 percent to 47.9 percent over the last one hundred years.²⁰

The United States, however, is in the Global North—a region that is increasingly made up of people like twenty-eight-year-old Claire Noelle Frost, who told *USA Today* she was once a Christian until she “let go of belief. . . . There’s so much I cannot prove. I’m not sure truth exists at all. Instead of ‘I believe,’ I say ‘maybe,’ and ‘who knows?’”²¹

So who are these *nones*? Not who you may think.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. When you read that “the future religious landscape of America will be increasingly dominated by the *nones*,” were you surprised?

2. The 2008 ARIS study that first charted the rise of the *nones* from 1990 to 2008 found that the *nones* had nearly doubled from 8.1 to 15 percent. That made those who claim no religious affiliation the third-largest defined religious constituency in the United States. Based on your own life experience and the community around you, does that seem accurate?
3. An important insight learned about Gen Xers is that as they age, they are not returning to religion as originally assumed. Have you seen this in your own church? What does this mean for you as a church leader or member?
4. One of the biggest challenges for churches today is the 40 percent of all emerging adults who are clearly distanced from religion. What is your church doing right now to reach the *nones*? What is your church doing that may further distance them?
5. If the “religiously indifferent,” those who neither care to practice nor oppose religion, had a motto, it would be: “It just doesn’t matter that much.” Do you see this reflected in society? Where and among whom?
6. Perhaps the largest shock related to the rise of the *nones* came from the Pew study titled “Nones on the Rise.” This study found that one in five Americans (19.3 percent) now claim no religious identity. How does that statistic alter how you engage your community?
7. Throughout all of the studies you read about is an underlying current that *nones* are simply leaving religion altogether. They are not going from Protestant Christianity to something else; they are dropping off the map altogether. Can you think of some reasons why?
8. What was made apparent by all of the studies chronicling the rise of the *nones* is that the landscape of American Christianity has changed. Given that, have your methods changed along with it? How?