

To: Students of the Family

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From: Andrew Hess

Re: Increasing “Nones” and Shrinking Faith - Is It As Bad As It Sounds?

**“Number of Protestant Americans Is In Steep Decline, Study Finds” (*The New York Times*)
“As Protestants decline, those with no religion gain” (*USA Today*)**

If you’ve seen the headlines, you may be concerned. A new survey conducted by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life¹ found the number of Americans who identify with no particular religion is increasing:

- 20% of U.S. adults (32% under 30) now describe themselves as religiously unaffiliated, marking the highest percentage of such adults—often called “nones”²—of any Pew poll to date.
- This is an increase since Pew’s 2007 Landscape Survey³ which found that only 16% of American adults described themselves as unaffiliated with any particular religion.

But are the headlines accurate in describing this shift as “steep” and “dramatic”? And are “nones” really turning from faith?

The Rest of the Story

The term “nones” is a misleading descriptor of this growing demographic. Pew found 46 million adults now describe themselves as religiously unaffiliated, but aren’t necessarily devoid of religion and spiritual belief.

The study found that of the unaffiliated:⁴

- 68% say they believe in God
- 37% classify themselves as “spiritual” but not “religious”
- 33% say religion has importance in their lives
- 21% pray every day

Even though,

- 5% attend worship services weekly
- 63% say religion is losing its influence on American life
- 67% say churches/religious organizations are too involved with politics

Pew researchers admit the weakness of the term “nones,” emphasizing “the absence of a religious affiliation does not necessarily indicate an absence of religious beliefs or practices.”⁵ Of the 46 million unaffiliated adults, only 28% (13 million) describe themselves as atheists or agnostics (only 6% of U.S. public).⁶ University of Connecticut’s Sociologist of Religion Bradley Wright, who has examined the report, clarifies, “Many of the ‘nones’ have strong spiritual & religious beliefs; they just don’t affiliate with a particular religion.”

¹ Cary Funk and Greg Smith, “Nones” on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation (The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, October 2012).

² “Nones” refers to people who indicate in surveys that they have no religion or do not belong to any particular religion.

³ *Faith in Flux: Change in Religious Affiliation in the U.S.* (The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, April 2009).

⁴ *General Social Surveys* (National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, 1970-1990).

⁵ “Nones” on the Rise, 7.

⁶ “Nones” on the Rise, 9.

Generational Differences

Younger generations are significantly more likely to identify as “unaffiliated” than older generations. Around a third of adults under 30 claim no religious affiliation (32%) and only one-in-ten of those 65 and older (9%).⁷

A very important point about where these young adults come from, family-wise, was made by Pew researchers in 2009 who found that those who leave faith tend to come from homes where they did not regularly attend church as teenagers or Sunday School as children. They were more likely to report *not* “having had a very strong religious faith as a child or teenager.” At that time, only 11% of those who abandoned their childhood Christian faith said they had a very strong faith during childhood.⁸ This begs the question whether many of the newly unaffiliated were ever strongly affiliated in the first place.

“Nones” Lean Democratic

Curiously, the religiously unaffiliated are “about twice as likely to describe themselves as political liberals than as conservatives”.⁹

- 63% are either registered Democrats (39%) or lean toward the Democratic Party (24%)
- 72% support legal abortion
- 73% support same-sex marriage

Liberal politics may be a significant reason many of these disaffiliate with churches that support more biblical positions on important issues like abortion and the definition of marriage and family. Religion is increasingly viewed as “judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical, and too political”¹⁰ by the unaffiliated, which is curious considering many politicians go to great lengths to emphasize the importance of their Christian faith.

Part of Broader Disengagement Trend

Religious affiliation may also be a part of a general social disengagement among young adults. Many leading sociologists have observed an increase in overall individualism and separation. Of the 46 million religiously unaffiliated, only 28% agreed it’s important to belong to “a community of people who share your values and beliefs.”¹¹ Professor Wright said the “nones” shifting religious affiliation should be considered in light of the fact that “young people are less affiliated with every aspect of conventional society...”

Implications for Focus on the Family

There is good and bad news here. There has been a shift in the religiosity of many Americans as older generations fail to pass on their religious affiliations to younger generations. However, for committed Christians, it’s important to note, as the Pew data above confirms and Notre Dame’s Christian Smith finds, that young adults raised in strong Christian homes are very likely to continue in the faith established early in their lives.¹²

Many of the unaffiliated, as Wright said, are “interested, aware and believing in God or a higher power. So, they might welcome and be interested in a well-presented message of faith.” Despite the increasing number of religiously unaffiliated, Pew researchers observe, “The number of Americans who currently say religion is *very important* in their lives (58%) ... is little changed since 2007 (61%).”¹³

Focus on the Family has a unique opportunity to reach out to the emerging generation, especially the unaffiliated or lukewarm, showing an accepting, compassionate engagement on social and political issues, without the judgmental/hypocritical rhetoric they increasingly reject. Parents should continue to be encouraged and equipped in their work of cultivating faith in their children, as faith passed to children from parents remains the strongest predictor of faith in adulthood.

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⁷ “Nones” on the Rise, 10.

⁸ *Faith in Flux*, 4.

⁹ “Nones” on the Rise, 11.

¹⁰ Robert Putnam and David E. Campbell. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. (Simon & Schuster, 2010), 120-121.

¹¹ “Nones” on the Rise, 31.

¹² Christian Smith. *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. (Oxford University Press, 2009), 254-256.

¹³ “Nones” on the Rise, 17.