

# **Beyond the “No Religion” Panic in the United States**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

In recent years, pollsters such as Pew and Gallup have been declaring that “Nones” are on the rise and growing at a rapid pace. Some one in five Americans – including a third of adults under 30 – allegedly have no religious affiliation, up considerably from previous decades. The news has been met with predictable responses. Many observers claim the trend shows that secularization is becoming more rampant, with the seemingly inevitable pattern of people in Western Europe and Canada abandoning religion at long last having caught up to the United States. However, the comparative facts of the matter show that so-called “American religious exceptionalism” is simply proving not to be so exceptional after all. The religion-no religion balance is universal, with religious markets dynamic and the balance between the two inclinations ever-changing. What will be intriguing to observe is the extent to which Americans – as with Canadians and people elsewhere – are inclined to opt for religion, no religion, or something in between.

## **Introduction**

A Canadian perhaps can be forgiven for having a sense of déjà vu as the word comes out that organized religion in the United States is in trouble.

The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life announced in an October 2012 release that “Nones” are on the rise” and “growing at a rapid pace”. Some one in five Americans – including a third of adults under 30 – allegedly “have no religious affiliation.” (Pew Research 2012). That 20% level is up considerably from Gallup figures of 2% through the 1960s, and some 10% through the 1990s (Winseman 2005, Gallup 2013). The Nones are now second only to Catholics, ahead of previous juggernauts such as Southern Baptists. Other Faiths (about 7%) have changed little in recent years, bolstered in both instances by immigration.

The "No Religion" gain has been almost totally at the expense of white Protestants. The Protestant market share has dropped from some 70% in 1950 to just under 50% today. In contrast, bolstered by immigration, the shares of Catholicism (close to 25%) and Other Faiths (about 7%) have changed little

The Pew Forum release also reminded readers of some predictable correlates: lower levels of identification means that fewer people are involved in religious groups and/or view religion as personally important. Yet, as in other settings including Canada, America’s “Nones” are not necessarily “Nevers” – in that some attend services at least once in a while, and often are different from “Nots” – in that many continue to believe in God and pray privately (see, for example, Bibby 2001, 2014). In the U.S., a full one-third of the disaffiliated view themselves as “spiritual but not religious.

The social and political attitudes of these disproportionately young “Nones” are likewise fairly predictable: They are more inclined than their religious counterparts to have negative views of religious groups, exhibit Democratic Party and politically liberal leanings, and are more likely to approve of things like legal abortion and same sex marriage.

## **The New Religious Recession**

The interpretations of the rise of “Religious Nones” in the United States also have been predictable. Observers claim the trend shows that secularization is becoming more rampant. The seemingly inevitable pattern of people in Western Europe and Canada abandoning religion has at long last caught up to the United States. Further, given that Millennials are the least affiliated generation in American history and unlikely to affiliate as they age, “the religious recession” is not about to end anytime soon. Unlike their predecessors, the emerging millennials are commonly not involved and feel no need to deny it. They also are open about disbelief.

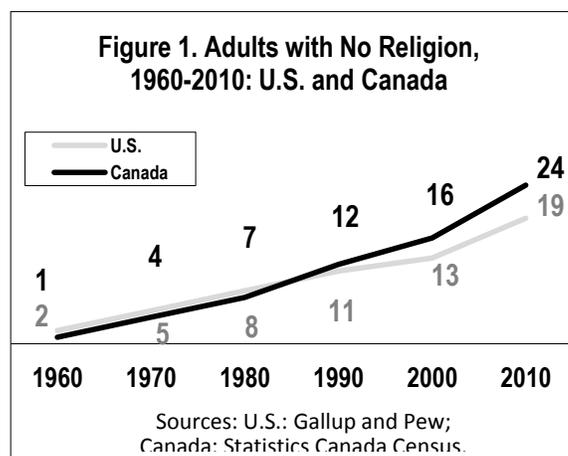
So it is that the Associated Press reported that the fact most of the unaffiliated are not actively seeking a religious home indicates “that their ties with organized religion are permanently broken” (Zoll 2012). *The New York Times* noted that such younger millennials “are replacing older generations who remained far more involved with religion throughout their lives” (Goodstein 2012). The *USA Today* quoted Pew senior researcher Greg Smith as confirming the apparent inevitability of religion’s demise, saying it’s unlikely Americans under 30 will claim a religion as they age (Grossman 2012). Clearly, the momentum seems to be on the side of the non-religious team.

Interestingly, the respected sage from Chicago, historian Martin Marty, has been somewhat solitary in being far less impressed with the apparent explosion of disaffiliation. He commented that, in reality, religious cohesion “has long been overstated,” adding that “the difference is now we have names for groups like Nones.” According to such thinking, there is no question that the percentage of Nones is up. But one main reason is because of cultural inflation – or maybe, better put, “cultural deflation.” These days, people who don’t belong and don’t believe are far more inclined than their predecessors to tell things the way they are.

### Welcome to Religious Polarization

Unknown to many, Canada has preceded the United States in experiencing significant growth in Religious Nones. In this country, the growth in the proportion of people who say they have no religion has pretty much paralleled that of the United States – along with the high casualties among Mainline Protestants. Today, the “no religion” figure is perhaps around five percentage points higher than in the U.S. For the record, both are below the British “no religion” figure of some 33%. Canadian weekly attendance has plummeted much more dramatically – from a higher-than-American level of some 60% in 1945 to a current, much lower-than American level of under 20%.

The advantage of having experienced such declines in identification and participation a bit earlier is that we also have had a bit more time to figure things out. From the 1970s through the 1990s, we chalked things up to *secularization*, assuming Canada was paying the inevitable price for coming of age. The religion-debilitating bug that had taken its toll in much of Protestant Europe had moved on to Canada.

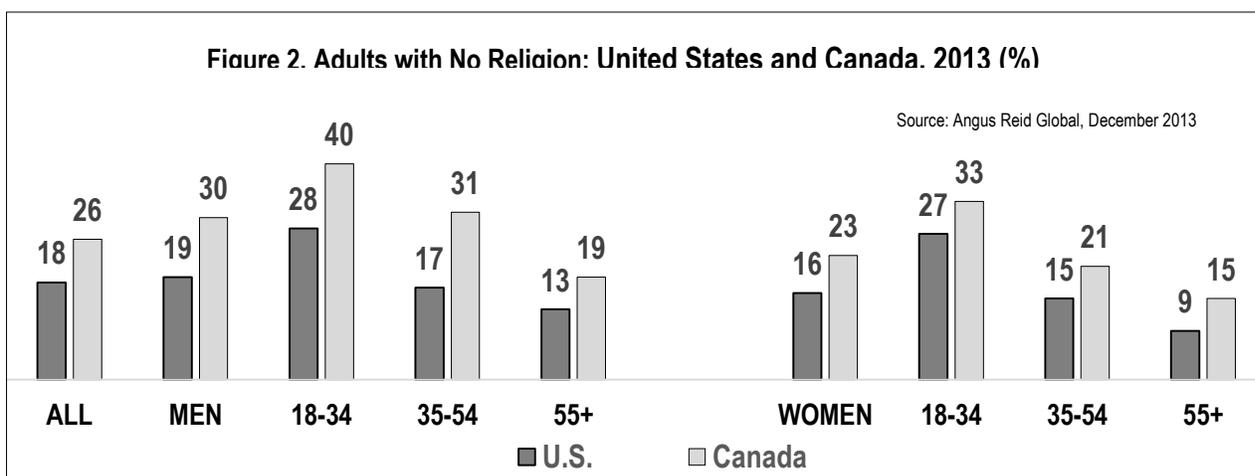


On occasion, though, we wondered why it didn't seem to be happening in "the States." Significantly, many Canadian groups tried to learn things by looking south.

The perceived decline didn't exactly do much for the morale of people who valued faith. The pervasive mood was that it was pretty much over for religion. People spoke of "post-Christianity," "faithful remnants," "significant minorities," and "prevailing churches." Those were not exactly concepts that served to rally the remaining troops.

For a short period of time as we moved into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there was some talk in Canada of religious rejuvenation – stimulated in part by yours truly's new 2002 tome, *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada*. In keeping with the thinking of prominent American sociologist Rodney Stark, I argued that the demand for the kinds of answers that religion brings to life and death means the market for religion continues to be extensive. As a result, it would only be a matter of time before groups – both new and renewed – emerged to meet the market demand. The question was not if but when. I provided data showing signs of new organizational life.

But the obvious reality that has persisted through the present time is the fact that sizable numbers of people are clearly taking a pass on religion – at least at this point in their lives. The data in both the United States and Canada show that the no religion inclination is particularly common among male and female adults under the age of 35 but also characteristic of sizable numbers of people between the ages of 35 and 54 as well. The inclination to opt for no religion is consistently somewhat higher among men than women in Canada, but the gender differences are small among American adults of all ages.



Some people have been speculating that growing numbers of people who are not "into religion" are "spiritual but not religious." In December of 2013, I worked with Angus Reid Global in exploring the extent to which the highly-publicized self-designation is actually held by American and Canadians who say they have no religion.

The survey involving some 1,000 Americans and 1,500 Canadians found that, in both countries, about 40% of those with no religion view themselves as “spiritual but not religious. But some 60% of the “religious nones” in Canada and 50% in the United States say that they are “neither spiritual nor religious.” In the U.S., the remaining 10% were equally divided between those who said they are “religious and spiritual” and “religious but not spiritual.”

	Neither Spiritual Nor Religious	Spiritual But Not Religious	Religious and Spiritual	Religious But Not Spiritual	Total
United States	50%	38	6	6	100
Canada	61	38	1	<1	100

Source: Angus Reid Global, December 2013.

I am increasingly convinced that *neither secularization nor revitalization theories* accurately describe what is taking place in Canada and elsewhere – including the U.S. Global data make it very clear that, in every society across the planet, religion persists – along with the inclination of some people to bypass religion.

Therefore, rather than speaking of one-way trends toward secularization or revitalization, it seems to be much more accurate and helpful to see religion and non-religion as the poles of a dynamic continuum.

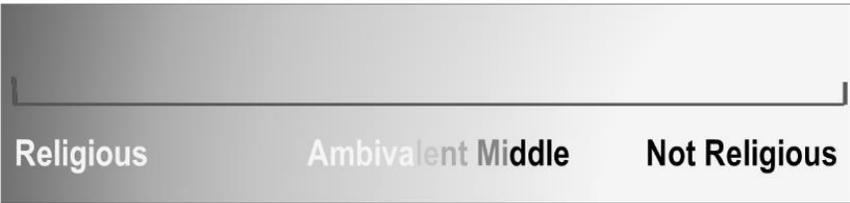
At any point in time, a society’s inclination to opt for one over the other will vary, depending on pro-religion and no-religion factors that are organizational and cultural in nature. But the proclivity to opt for religion will always co-exist with the proclivity to reject it, with noteworthy numbers of people comprising something of an ambivalent middle.

The primary academic question is the extent to which populations, at any points in time, tend to gravitate toward one end of the continuum versus the other. The obvious secondary question is why such variations take place.

	Salience	ID	Belief	Attend
Thailand	97%	99	98	80
Nigeria	96	99	99	89
Philippines	96	99	99	64
Saudi Arabia	94	99	99	68
Pakistan	92	99	99	56
Ethiopia	90	99	99	78
India	90	99	99	73
Dominican Republic	87	99	97	53
Brazil	87	93	97	49
Iraq	86	99	99	53
South Africa	85	84	99	57
Iran	83	99	99	45
El Salvador	83	83	98	68
Mexico	73	83	97	60
Italy	72	83	82	49
Greece	71	97	96	29
Poland	69	92	96	62
<b>UNITED STATES</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>43</b>
Ireland	54	94	96	56
Israel	51	96	95	39
Spain	49	84	92	39
Ukraine	46	58	85	23
Korea, Republic of	43	63	98	35
<b>CANADA</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>26</b>
Germany	40	75	77	30
Cuba	34	90	75	20
Russia	34	52	91	15
New Zealand	33	74	79	27
Netherlands	33	58	74	26
Australia	32	81	83	23
France	30	57	80	20
Finland	29	85	91	12
United Kingdom	27	77	86	20
Hong Kong	24	85	56	19
Japan	24	48	87	38
Czech Republic	24	41	57	15
Sweden	17	75	70	17
China	---	7	60	9

Source: Reginald W. Bibby, *Beyond the Gods & Back* 2011: 59.

In *Beyond the Gods & Back* (2011), I have described such a situation as *polarization*. In using the term, I am simply speaking of the inclination of populations to embrace religion versus reject it. Lest people – particularly Americans – be confused, I am not speaking of cultural wars or cultural conflict as articulated by people like James Davison Hunter (1992) and Robert Putnam and his colleague David Campbell (2001). I regard the ideas and behaviour of people who value faith and those who do not as potentially important correlates that are fodder for empirical research – something I explore in the book in some detail.



### Conclusion

While some observers may be startled by the American growth in Religious Nones and see ongoing secularization as virtually inevitable, I am not among them. The reason is that so-called “American religious exceptionalism” is simply proving not to be so exceptional after all. Historically, the religious polarization continuum in the U.S. has been weighted heavily on the pro-religion side. Currently, there is some modest movement in the direction of the no religion side. Such balance between religion and no religion is universal.

But, as with elsewhere, the story is hardly final and we need to keep the camera running. The religion market is always “up for grabs.” Following Stark, the increase in the percentage of Nones means the opportunity exists for religious groups to increase their market shares. Apart from outcomes, there is little doubt we will see accelerated activity in the American religious marketplace.

An important word of caution: my research in Canada has been showing, that, at least to date, residence in the no religion category often tends to be short-lived. Many teenage Nones are looking to religious groups for rites of passage that frequently result in reaffiliation. Nones who marry “Somethings” frequently raise their children as “Somethings” and not uncommonly follow suit. Further, large numbers of adult and teenage Nones indicate they have not slammed the door on involvement that they deem to be worthwhile.

In Canada, the reality of religious polarization is a far cry from what was anticipated by theories of linear secularization. It is literally *A New Day* for religion, where market demand remains high, precisely at a time when growing numbers are rejecting religion. Changing demographics and varied market performances are contributing to a restructuring of players. Mainline Protestants are losing market share to Catholics, evangelicals, and Muslims.

But the inclinations to embrace religion and reject religion co-exist, with the balance always in dynamic flux. Such religious polarization, as I've been emphasizing, is found everywhere – even now, as the Pew Forum data remind us, in the United States.

A cause for pause? The inclination of Americans to opt for religion or no religion will depend largely on how the nation's groups collectively respond with life-enhancing ministry. The news of the rise in Religious Nones does not signal demise and doom for religion. On the contrary, it signals new opportunities, and the need for appropriate responses.

A cause for pause? Whether Americans opt for religion or no religion will depend largely on how the nation's religious groups collectively respond with life-enhancing ministry.

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