

ESSAY

# Can Religion Still Speak to Younger Americans?

Among 18- to 29-year-olds, 44% declare that they have no religious affiliation. Maybe it's because their idea of faith is too narrow.

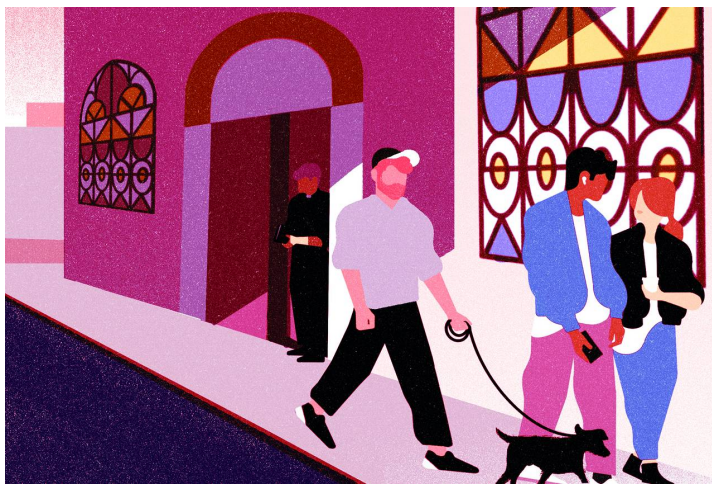


ILLUSTRATION: ANDREA MONGIA

*By Timothy Beal*

Nov. 14, 2019 10:59 am ET

The fastest-growing population on the American religious landscape today is “Nones”—people who don’t identify with any religion. Recent data from the American Family Survey indicates that their numbers increased from 16% in 2007 to 35% in 2018. Over the same period, there has been a dramatic decline in the share of the population who identify as Christian, from 78% of Americans in 2007 to 65% in 2018-19, according to a report by the Pew Research Center released this month. The rise of Nones is even more dramatic among younger people: 44% of Americans aged 18 to 29 are Nones.

What’s going on? A big part of the answer is that there is less social pressure to identify as religious, especially among young adults. In fact, a young adult today is more likely to feel social pressure to justify being religious than being None. Another factor is the rise of families in which the parents identify with different religions: Children in such families are often raised

with exposure to both identities and left to decide for themselves which to adopt. In many cases, they eventually choose neither.

And part of the answer is that many of the personal and social functions traditionally performed by religious institutions are now being served by new communities that we might call “alt-religious.” Harvard Divinity School’s “How We Gather” initiative has drawn attention, for example, to the rapidly growing numbers of millennials who skip church or synagogue for their particular brand of “fitness cult,” such as SoulCycle, which grew from one studio in 2006 to 88 in 2018, with more than 10,000 riders a day. In these movements, as in a church, myth (in the form of the company’s origin story and mission statement) and rituals (a carefully regulated order of actions for leader and congregants) work together to create a sacred or “set apart” time and space.

But if we look at the reasons that Nones themselves give for not identifying with any religion, it’s clear that they are not only driven by external forces. There are things about religion, as they perceive it, that are actively driving them away. The two most significant reasons they give, according to a 2018 Pew poll, are that they “question a lot of religious teachings” (60%) and, relatedly, “don’t like the positions churches take on political/social issues” (49%).

Based on my own experience with hundreds of young adult Nones in my classes over more than two decades, I’ve found that the specific “religious teachings” and related “positions” they object to most often concern sexuality and science. Many of them question what they perceive as religion’s negative views about women’s reproductive rights and non-heteronormative sexuality, especially same-sex marriage and transgender rights. And they question religious teachings that appear to fly in the face of scientific research, especially with regard to evolutionary theory and climate change.

But the Nones aren’t simply liberal young adults who are leaving more conservative religions. As the latest Pew report indicates, Nones are becoming more common across the political spectrum (albeit more rapidly on the left). And mainline Protestant denominations, which tend toward more liberal views of science and sexuality, are declining faster than evangelical churches, which tend to be more conservative.

Rather, what many Nones have in common is a tragically narrow understanding of religion—namely, that a religion is a fixed set of teachings and positions, and that to be religious is to submit to them without question. It is presumed that religion is authoritative, univocal and changeless, and that religious identity is essentially a matter of passive adherence.

**Questioning religious teachings and positions has always been an essential part of religion.**

The Pew  
poll itself  
promote

s this idea of religion with some of the response options it provides for identifying as None: “I

question a lot of religious teachings” and “I don’t like the positions churches take on political/social issues.” The implication is that being religious means not questioning religious teachings and sharing the positions a religious organization takes on current issues.

But questioning religious teachings and positions has always been an essential part of religion. No faith is fixed or changeless. On the contrary, reinterpreting inherited scriptures and traditions in light of new horizons of meaning is critical to the life of any religion. Think of Jesus or the Buddha; think of the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th-century founder of Hasidic Judaism, or Dorothy Day, who helped to create the Catholic Worker Movement. Religion’s ongoing vitality depends on those who question and challenge inherited teachings and positions. Without such engagement, any religious tradition will die from the inside long before it begins to lose adherents.

I find that when my students, including the majority Nones, are given access to religion not as a set of teachings and positions but as a space for active engagement with enduring questions, they lean in. Indeed, they find this way of thinking about religion a refreshing change from their generally polarized political interactions and personalized newsfeeds.

In a recent class on debates over gender and sexuality in Protestant Christianity, for example, I invited my friend Nadia Bolz-Weber, an ordained Lutheran minister and best-selling author, to lead a discussion about her new book “Shameless: A Sexual Reformation,” which argues that the church needs a sexual revolution on par with the theological revolution of the Protestant Reformation. From there a discussion about same-sex marriage emerged, and we dived into the different biblical texts that are cited in support of theological arguments on the subject. No consensus was reached, but all the participants were energized by the diversity of interpretations and viewpoints.

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In another course on religion and ecology, we conducted a “trial” of the Bible on the charge of being responsible for our environmental crisis. I quickly polled the class to see who was inclined to say “guilty” and who was inclined to say “not guilty.”

Then I had each group argue for the opposite point of view. Given license to explore on their own, rather than simply documenting inherited teachings and official positions, the students spent days researching their cases and argued them passionately. Their conclusion, of course,

was that the Bible's legacy is far more complicated than a simple verdict can address. The students learned that there are intellectually responsible arguments by people of faith on all sides.

I have no doubt that the polls will continue to show a decline in religious affiliation, especially Christian affiliation. But such statistics never tell the whole story, and in this case the survey questions may be predetermining the results. What we need is sustained conversation in a context that allows and even welcomes different experiences and points of view. What do you mean when you self-define as religiously None? What is the story behind that box you checked? What are the teachings and positions that you question? Did you always question them, or did something in your life lead you to think differently?

When it comes to religion, Nones are almost never nothing at all.

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