

Why America's 'nones' left religion behind

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(Photo by Raymond Boyd/Getty Images)

Perhaps the most striking trend in American religion in recent years has been the growing percentage of adults who do not identify with a religious group. And the vast majority of these religious “nones” (78%) say they were raised as a member of a particular religion before shedding their religious identity in adulthood.

Half of 'nones' left childhood faith over lack of belief, one-in-five cite dislike of organized religion

Reasons for disaffiliating among those who were raised in a religion and are currently ...

	NET Unaffiliated	Atheist	Agnostic	Nothing in particular
	%	%	%	%
Don't believe	49	82	63	37
Disenchanted/don't believe	36	71	46	25
Not interested in/don't need religion	7	3	8	7
Views evolved	7	7	12	5
Went through a crisis of faith	1	2	1	1
Dislike organized religion	20	10	19	22
Anti-institutional religion	15	2	17	16
Religion focuses on power/politics	4	5	1	6
Religion causes conflict	1	3	2	1
Religiously unsure/undecided	18	5	12	22
Unaffiliated but religious	7	1	1	10
Seeking/open-minded	6	3	5	7
Spiritual but not religious	3	2	4	3
Uncertain about beliefs	2	0	4	2
Inactive believer	10	0	3	14
Non-practicing	8	0	2	11
Too busy	2	0	1	3
Other	<1	0	<1	1
Unclear/no answer	6	3	7	6

Note: Excludes those who said they had been misclassified and were still affiliated with a religion. Figures do not sum to 100% or to subtotals indicated because multiple responses were permitted.

Source: 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study recontact survey conducted March 17-May 6, 2015. Q13.

"Choosing a New Church or House of Worship"

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As part of a new survey connected to our broader Religious Landscape Study, we asked these people to explain, in their own words, *why* they no longer identify with a religious group. This resulted in hundreds of different responses (after all, everyone's religious experience is a bit different), but many of them shared one of a few common themes.

About half of current religious "nones" who were raised in a religion (49%) indicate that a lack of belief led them to move away from religion. This includes many respondents who mention "science" as the reason they do not believe in religious teachings, including one who said "I'm a scientist now, and I don't believe in miracles." Others reference "common sense," "logic" or a "lack of evidence" – or simply say they do not believe in God.

But there are other reasons people give for leaving behind their childhood religion. One-in-five express an opposition to organized religion in general. This share includes some who do not like the

hierarchical nature of religious groups, several people who think religion is too much like a business and others who mention clergy sexual abuse scandals as reasons for their stance.

Examples of reasons why people are unaffiliated

Don't believe

- "Learning about evolution when I went away to college."
- "Too many Christians doing un-Christian things."
- "Religion is the opiate of the people."
- "Rational thought makes religion go out the window."
- "Lack of any of sort of scientific or specific evidence of a creator."
- "I just realized somewhere along the line that I didn't really believe it."
- "I'm doing a lot more learning, studying and kind of making decisions myself rather than listening to someone else."

Dislike organized religion

- "I see organized religious groups as more divisive than uniting."
- "I think that more harm has been done in the name of religion than any other area."
- "I no longer believe in organized religion. I don't attend services anymore. I just believe that religion is very personal conversation with me and my creator."
- "Because I think religion is not a religion anymore. It's a business ... it's all about money."
- "The clergy sex abuse scandal."
- "The church's teachings on homosexuality."

Religiously unsure/undecided

- "I don't have a particular religion because I am open-minded and I don't think there is one particular religion that is right or wrong."
- "I feel that there is something out there, but I can't nail down a religion."
- "Right now I'm kind of leaning towards spirituality, but I'm not too sure. I know I can pray to my God anywhere. I do believe in a higher power, but I don't need a church to do that."

Inactive believer

- "I just basically stopped going to church when I went to college and never picked it back up. I was never super religious."
- "I don't practice any religion and I don't go to church or participate in any of the rituals of the church."
- "I don't have the time to go to church."

A similar share (18%) say they are religiously unsure. This includes people who say they are religious in some way despite being unaffiliated (e.g., “I believe in God, but in my own way”), others who describe themselves as “seeking enlightenment” or “open-minded,” and several who say they are “spiritual” if not religious.

One-in-ten religious “nones” who say they were raised with a religious affiliation are now classified as “inactive” religiously. These people may hold certain religious beliefs, but they are not currently taking part in religious practices. And most of them simply say they don’t go to church or engage in other religious rituals, while others say they are too busy for religion.

Religious “nones” are by no means monolithic. They can be broken down into three broad subgroups: self-identified atheists, those who call themselves agnostic and people who describe their religion as “nothing in particular.” Given these different outlooks, it is not surprising that there are major gaps among these three groups when it comes to why they left their childhood religion behind. An overwhelming majority of atheists who were raised in a religion (82%) say they simply do not believe, but this is true of a smaller share of agnostics (63%) and only 37% of those in the “nothing in particular” category.

In fact, while this latter group certainly includes many nonbelievers, it also has substantial shares of people who, alternatively, are opposed to organized religion (22%) or who could be described as religiously unsure or undecided (22%). And more than one-in-ten people with the “nothing in particular” label (14%) say they are either non-practicing or too busy to engage in religious practices, compared with zero atheists in the survey and only 3% of agnostics.