
Where Are We and How Did We Get Here?

WE LIVE IN A post-Christian world. Thomas Merton recognized this during his lifetime and in 1962 defined it as being “a world in which Christian ideals and attitudes are relegated more and more to the minority.”¹ He went on to declare that what often presents itself as a Christian society is “more purely and simply a materialistic neopaganism with a Christian veneer. And where the Christian veneer has been stripped off we see laid bare the awful vacuity of the mass mind, without morality, without identity, without compassion, without sense, and rapidly reverting to tribalism and superstition.”² Since that time the American religious landscape has continued to change, with institutional Christianity declining in membership and influence. In this chapter, I survey the state of organized religion today and examine a handful of notable recent developments.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Part I. The Reformation

Our current religious environment is the culmination of changes that began centuries ago. Specifically, the Protestant Reformation and Enlightenment started a process of religious and philosophical fragmentation that

1. Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, 72.
2. Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, 72.

continues today. It is important to briefly examine these changes in order to better appreciate our current state of affairs. I have chosen to begin this inquiry with the Protestant Reformation, acknowledging that in addition to the real need for religious reform there were also a number of other factors, e.g., philosophical, social, economic, and political, that led to this watershed event.

While I and many others argue that the Reformation started a process of religious fragmentation that continues today, it is important to point out that the Reformation did not spring from a completely homogenous Christendom. Recognizing this fact helps put the current state of religiosity into a historical context. It is true that Roman Catholicism contains a comprehensive creed and code. However, history shows that what is taught as the “official” tenets of a particular faith often varies from the lived or everyday religion of the faithful. This is certainly true in the centuries leading up to the Reformation. There was no one single faith among the laity during this time. Instead, there was a spectrum ranging from various degrees of belief to unbelief.³ There are many documented instances of Christians of this time questioning various aspects of the faith, including Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist, the concept of purgatory, and the clerical and civil role of the clergy.⁴ In addition, the role and veneration of saints sometimes elicited passionate responses. One medieval account describes an unnamed man who, incensed by the veneration of St. Aldhelm, lowered his breeches and broke wind in the direction of the saint’s relics as they proceeded past him.⁵

The laity often incorporated a wide-ranging set of rival beliefs, including what was considered to be magic, in an effort to help make sense of and assert some kind of control over a world that was often violent and chaotic. These magical practices were not always meant to counter Catholic ones. Instead, they were often an amalgam of folk and Christian beliefs. For example, as historian Catherine Rider notes,

charms that were recited over sick people to cure illnesses often invoked God and the saints; spells for love and other purposes might use consecrated substances such as the Eucharist; and one way of predicting the future was to use a book on lot-casting called

3. Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*, 230.

4. Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*, 217–18.

5. Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*, 222.

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the Lots of the Saints or Lots of the Apostles, which claimed to be based on the example set by the Apostles in the New Testament.⁶

This simultaneous belief in magic and Christianity persisted not just among the uneducated masses; it was also found in every social class, including the well-educated.⁷ Texts about ritual magic were written by the educated for those who were both literate and affluent enough to purchase these books.⁸ In addition, the belief in magic as a real force was given credibility when the church preached against its dangers and condemned those accused of being magicians. At times the state also gave credence to a belief in magic by outlawing its practice. For example, in 1441, the English government arrested a group, including scholars, clergy, and members of the palace court, for using magic.⁹

It is important to note that while folk practices like magic coexisted with Christianity there were also periods of organized opposition to the Catholic Church. There had always been those who disagreed with the church and who were labeled as “heretics.” However, the Catholic Church in Europe faced its first theological and organized rival since the time of the late Roman Empire in Catharism.¹⁰ The precise origins of this movement are unknown, but from the twelfth through the fourteenth century, tens of thousands of adherents, residing primarily in Southern France and Northern Italy, worked to build a rival church.¹¹ The Cathar Church was well organized and divided into dioceses, with bishops assigned to each of those areas. Each diocese also contained lay deacons and *perfecti* who acted as priests or ministers to the faithful. Other lay members were referred to as *credentes*.

The Cathars claimed to be the true Christian church, proclaiming that Catholicism was wrong doctrinally and had become corrupt. Their theology was built on older dualistic belief systems, e.g., Manichaeism, and Bogomilism, teaching that God and the devil were two eternal forces battling against each other—light versus dark.¹² The Cathar creation myth included a belief that the devil had snuck into heaven, recruiting souls to join him

6. Rider, *Magic and Religion in Medieval England*, 8.

7. Rider, *Magic and Religion in Medieval England*, 9.

8. Rider, *Magic and Religion in Medieval England*, 114.

9. Rider, *Magic and Religion in Medieval England*, 98.

10. Barber, *Cathars in Languedoc*, xi.

11. Weis, *Yellow Cross*, xxi.

12. Weis, *Yellow Cross*, xxi.

in exchange for earthly wealth. Once there, Satan created the human body. Based on this, Cathars believed things of the flesh were evil.¹³ Partly influenced by this belief they rejected the virgin birth and the concept of transubstantiation. This disdain for the body can also be seen in their central sacrament—*consolamentum*. This was a rite done for one of the faithful on their deathbed. A *perfecti* would say a series of prayers, read from the gospel, and lay hands on the soon to be departed. They believed this process was vital to gain entry into heaven. Without it, the soul was doomed to be reincarnated, once again imprisoned in a human body.¹⁴

The growth of the Cathars posed a threat to Catholic authority. At first the Catholic hierarchy tried persuasion and debate in order to show them the “error of their ways.” When that failed the Cathars were officially condemned in 1179 at the Third Lateran Council. After that did not bring about the desired Cathar conversion, Pope Innocent III proclaimed a crusade against the heretical group, leading to their eventual elimination.¹⁵

While the Christian faith may not have been completely homogenous before the Reformation, the path towards today’s splintered religiosity started there. This is hardly a novel argument, with many scholars writing extensively to support that assertion.¹⁶ The early reformers sought to usher in needed changes to the Catholic Church. Martin Luther’s emphasis on the priesthood of all individual believers caused many Christians to look to themselves, rather than any institutional church, to be the ultimate arbiters of the meaning of Scripture, faith, and truth. As biographer Lyndal Roper writes, Luther elevated the role of the individual in matters of faith, giving ordinary Christians the “ability to decide who was preaching true Christian doctrine, rather than blindly accepting the word of the priest. Scripture was clear, Luther argued, and its meaning apparent to all.”¹⁷

This authoritative turn to the self led to what theologian Mark C. Taylor describes as the privatization, deregulation, and decentralization of religious authority.¹⁸ Taylor writes, “as religion was privatized and every believer became a priest, the centralized hierarchical authority of the church

13. Weis, *Yellow Cross*, 123–24.

14. Weis, *Yellow Cross*, 124.

15. Barber, *Cathars in Languedoc*, 4.

16. For example, see Brad S. Gregory’s *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* and Mark C. Taylor’s *After God*.

17. Roper, *Martin Luther*, 157.

18. Taylor, *After God*, 65.

broke down and authority was distributed among individual believers.¹⁹ This rejection of the teaching authority of the Catholic Church resulted in the abandonment of a shared framework of knowledge.²⁰ For better or worse, this mostly monolithic faith had served as a common lens that all could use to view the world and evaluate issues of faith, morality, and life's ultimate questions. The Reformer's new reliance on *Solo Scriptura* did not lead to the Bible simply replacing Catholic teaching. Instead, it led to an array of scriptural interpretations and corresponding religious practices, all of which resulted in further segmentation. Historian Brad S. Gregory argues this very point:

[T]he Reformation is the most important distant historical source for contemporary Western hyperpluralism with respect to truth claims about meaning, morality, values, priorities, and purpose. Despite the hopes and dreams of Reformation protagonists, the result of their distinctive appeal to scripture alone was not a set of clear mandates for reforming human life according to “the Gospel,” but an undesired, open-ended range of rival truth claims about answers to the Life Questions.²¹

Part II. The Enlightenment

The Reformation implanted a belief in a growing number of Christians that they did not need a clerical system or church to discover the truth about Scripture and God. These trends gained momentum and, in some ways, changed trajectory in the mid-seventeenth century with the dawn of the Enlightenment. This wide-ranging intellectual movement was underpinned by a belief that old knowledge, be it from Greek philosophers or church teachings, should be treated with skepticism. Instead of relying on old belief systems there was an emphasis on modern thought and reason, thus earning the other moniker for this movement—the Age of Reason. The Enlightenment started in Western Europe and continued on into the nineteenth century.

It was within this context that the influence of organized religion began to wane. While most of the general public was largely oblivious to the

19. Taylor, *After God*, 65.

20. Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, 326.

21. Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, 369.

intellectual trends of the Enlightenment, the seeds of individual belief not reliant upon the mediation of a particular religion were further cultivated during this time. This trend would continue with the corresponding rise in literacy and the emerging middle class. This literate class of Western Europeans developed an intellectual curiosity and clamored for more knowledge. Commercial publishers sought to capitalize on this growing demand by producing a wide variety of works, many of which were not affiliated with or censored by any particular church.

During this time a new kind of religion emerged, heavily influenced by Enlightenment thought—Deism. It affirmed a belief that a benevolent and rational being created the universe. Deism also emphasized the use of reason, science, and knowledge derived through experience. It follows then that creation contains universal laws that can be known through the use of human reason. Based on this ethos Deism sought to remove any supernatural or miraculous elements, or any kind of private revelations that claimed to offer divine knowledge. Accordingly, prevailing Christian doctrines about the divinity of Jesus, the Trinity, the reliability of Scripture, etc. were disregarded. As philosopher Kerry S. Walters writes, Deists believed these long-held religious beliefs “violated ordinary human experience and were antithetical to the dictates of reason. Belief in them, they said, not only kept mankind in the shackles of superstition and ignorance but also insulted the majesty and dignity of God.”²²

RELIGION AND FAITH TODAY

In the last decade there has been a steady stream of research documenting changing attitudes about religion. The most thorough and noteworthy studies were produced by the Pew Research Center.²³ In 2007, and again in 2014, they explored the US religious landscape by taking over 35,000 phone surveys. In addition, Pew has done periodic updates, the most recent of which was published in October 2019. One of the key findings from all of this research is that the Christian portion of the United States is steadily declining, while the number of adults who do not identify with

22. Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 8.

23. The Pew Research Center describes itself as a nonpartisan “fact tank” that informs the public about the issues, attitudes, and trends shaping America and the world. It does not take policy positions. It conducts public-opinion polling, demographic research, media content analysis, and other empirical social science research.

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any organized religion continues to rise. This trend is seen in every part of the country and every age bracket.²⁴ The percentage of adults who describe themselves as Christian dropped from 78.4 percent in 2007 to 65 percent in 2019. This decrease in Christian affiliation was primarily driven by a decline in Mainline Protestant and Catholic membership. While almost all Christian denominations saw a decrease, the number of nondenominational Evangelicals increased 1.5 percent between 2007 and 2014.²⁵ Many of these believers are affiliated with Protestant megachurches, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

Rise of the Nones

The continued growth of Nones, those people who select “None” when asked to identify their religious affiliation, has received a great deal of attention in the secular and religious press. The 2019 Pew update found that almost 26 percent of all Americans now consider themselves to be religiously unaffiliated.²⁶ This number is up from 16 percent in 2007.²⁷ To put that in perspective, the size of this group is now larger than all Mainline Protestant dominations combined.²⁸ This trend is likely to continue as the Millennial and younger generations get older, as these cohorts have a much lower rate of religious affiliation than older ones.²⁹

Who Are the Nones?

There has been a great deal of research into what Nones actually believe. Most Nones, 68 percent, believe in God.³⁰ Many of these religiously unaffiliated, 37 percent, classify themselves as spiritual but not religious, believing that organized religions are, as one member of the survey described, “too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved

24. “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” 3.

25. “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” 21.

26. “In U.S. Decline of Christianity Continues,” 3.

27. “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” 4.

28. Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 6.

29. “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” 11.

30. “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” 9.

in politics.”³¹ However, a third of Nones attend a worship service of some kind, usually in a church or other traditional house of worship, at least once a year.³² Four percent of Nones are self-described atheists, with another 5 percent identifying as agnostic.³³ All of this quantitative data is invaluable in identifying trends. However, it can only provide a surface view. Luckily there is also a great deal of qualitative research available that provides a deeper glimpse into the lives of those Americans who have no religious affiliation.

In her book, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones*, Elizabeth Drescher argues that by choosing “None” one refuses “to participate in the normative system of religious identification, where labels suggest general agreement with beliefs, values, and practices that distinguish one religious institution from another.”³⁴ In the past, terms like “pagan” or “heathen” were used to denigrate those who did not conform. Today however, the term “None” carries little of that negative weight.

Drescher conducted a number of focus groups with Nones to better understand what was most important to them. She found that many of them were opposed to religion because it “carries historical, ideological, and political baggage that is imagined as having traveled into contemporary life like a grumpy, argumentative uncle from the old country—stilted language, silly costumes, dated music, and an assumed (but by now largely evacuated) authority in tow.”³⁵

Many of the Nones Drescher met were raised in a religious faith. A number of former Mainline Protestants cited the boredom of repetitive teaching and emphasis on church attendance as reasons for leaving. Grounded in a moral and ethical tradition, these Nones were ready to “shed denominational identity like an old coat—maybe one they used to like a great deal, but which no longer fits into their adult lives.”³⁶

Those Nones who believe in God also saw themselves as actively creating spiritual meaning in their lives.³⁷ Drescher observes that our culture is infused with religious tropes and practices. It is understandable then

31. “Nones’ on the Rise,” 10.

32. Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 25.

33. “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues,” 3.

34. Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 30.

35. Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 45.

36. Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 69.

37. Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 54.