

Secularization in the U.S.: Overblown or Underestimated?

Sightings, <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/secularization-us-overblown-or-underestimated> (Nov. 5, 2015)

The rise of Americans who report “no religion” has gotten considerable attention from the media. The growth in numbers has been dramatic. But the data cannot be taken at face value, and the likely exaggerations run in both directions. Some of the “nones” are conventionally religious but unaffiliated, and some of those who report religious belief or affiliation appear not to be religious in any meaningful sense.

Self-professed atheists are the tip of a vastly larger secular population of non-believers and nominal believers.

In the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), with a sample size of more than 54,000, we can get representative data even on very small religious groups. Only 1.6% of Americans reported their religion as atheist or agnostic in 2008, but 15% (including the atheists and agnostics) reported having no religion. Another 5.2%, demographically similar to the no-religion people, said either that they *do not know* their religion or that they refused to answer the question.

Pew Forum surveys, with sample sizes of more than 35,000, found 4% self-identifying as atheist or agnostic in 2007, and 7% in 2014. Pew gets consistently higher numbers than ARIS on this question; there may be a real increase over time in willingness to claim these labels and also some difference in how Pew asks the question. Pew in 2014 found another 15.8% who said their religion is “nothing in particular,” for a total of 22.8% reporting no religion, and only 0.6% who did not know or refused to answer.

These answers cannot be taken entirely at face value, but the likely exaggerations run in both directions. One study suggests that much of the growth in people reporting no religion is people disgusted with the religious right and trying to dissociate themselves from it.

Some of the no-religion people report rather conventional religious beliefs. In the 2014 Pew survey, nearly half the “nothing in particulars” and a majority of the atheists and agnostics also said that religion is somewhat or very important in their lives. More remarkably, in the 2007 Pew survey, 21% of self-identified atheists said they believe in God or a universal spirit, and 10% of atheists said they pray at least weekly.

You cannot assume that survey respondents all understand the questions the same way you do.

These answers suggest believers with no religious identity. But other Americans report a religious identity without having much in the way of belief.

When ARIS asked about the existence of God, 12.3% said “There is no such thing,” “There is no way to know,” or “I’m not sure.” These are the atheist and agnostic answers, and they appeared nearly eight times as often as people who labeled themselves atheist or agnostic.

Another 6.1% refused to answer. It seems unlikely that belief in God is an important part of the lives of those who refuse to answer the question. Another 12.1% said, “There is a higher power but no personal God.” That leaves 69.5% who said “There is definitely a personal God.”

A 30% minority is nearly a hundred million Americans with no strong belief in a personal God.

And of course, not everyone who tells a pollster he believes in God is actually religious. The religiously indifferent who rarely think about it much may report belief in God when asked. They may also live their daily lives on a thoroughly secular worldview, with belief in God rising to consciousness only when someone asks.

It is hard to get at these gradations of belief with a survey instrument. But the 2014 Pew survey reports that only 53% of Americans say that religion is “very important” in their lives. The 2007 Pew Survey found that only 29% say they rely mainly on their religious beliefs for guidance regarding right and wrong, and 34% say that “[r]eligion causes more problems in society than it solves.”

Religious *behaviors* are also consistent with a large secular minority. In the ARIS data, 30% of married Americans said they were not married in a religious ceremony, and 27% of Americans did not expect to have a religious funeral when they die. And that’s before we count the people who show up at church only to be married and buried.

I am not suggesting that the United States is on the path to secularization. We are still a highly religious nation. Fifty-three percent would be a comfortable win in any election; 69.5% would be a landslide.

But the secular minority is also large. Judges and legislators can no longer dismiss it as too small to matter.

Sources

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