

"Do We Even Need Religion Anymore?"



*Part I of the 2025 Lenten Sermon Series
"What is the Value and Importance of Being Religious?"*

This is the first in a sermon series which I will be preaching this Lent, exploring what, if any, value or importance there is in being a "religious" person in today's world. My four children, as I have mentioned before, all grew up in the church and it was lots of fun, they admit. They enjoyed costumed pageants and children's homilies and lively youth activities, but none of my children now go to church. They are, as they tell me, "spiritual but not religious!" And my children are not alone in this, for as I imagine you all know by now, the fastest growing group in religion in America are the "nones," the 'none

of the above' category of religious preference. So, I am unsure what this trend means, why this has happened, and whether we even need religion anymore.

In his new book, "Nonverts: The Making of Ex-Christian America," Stephen Bullivant, an English researcher, wanted to know why Americans, once considered the exception to the secularization that has haunted Europe for decades, why Americans are only now suddenly losing their religion. And it *is* sudden, he notes. "This kind of religious change in a society doesn't normally happen in the space of only 20 or 30 years." "It's been within the space of (only) one or perhaps two generations that we've seen this sudden (and dramatic) surge" of "nones" --- though encouragingly some recent surveys have started to suggest this trend is at least finally leveling off some.

It was only in the 1990s that nonreligion began climbing up from its long-held baseline of around 7% of the population to what is now between three and five times that amount, depending on the survey, but all national surveys reveal the same dramatic rise of that trendline. Bullivant says the majority of this shift, and this is important I think, the majority of this shift is caused by people actively leaving the religion of their childhood (the "nonverts" of his book's title). "So, the question is about why there is this sudden rise in America of

"nones?" But to Bullivant, the more interesting question is why it didn't happen earlier." Why did this change *not* start in the 1960s, for example, when American culture was in a state of upheaval, but started instead only in the mid-'90s?

Some scholars see the nonreligion of the "nones" as a backlash against the GOP's "Contract with America" in 1994 and the rise of the religious right and the Moral Majority at that time, with their somewhat oppressive and conservative agenda. And that's likely part of it, Bullivant said, noting how quickly the American public changed its mind on gay marriage, for example. But he looked at three other developments to help understand why people in this country are now leaving their religions in such high numbers.

First, there was the end of the Cold War. For decades after the Second World War "there was a big threat of 'godless communism'" in this country, making it hard for anyone with religious doubts to admit to them publicly. For the social cost of being considered "un-American" was just too high, thus this kept the numbers of religious 'nones' artificially low, Bullivant suggests.

Then suddenly the Cold War ended, the Berlin wall came down, and people could now more openly admit to being nonreligious in America without fear of being labeled "un-American." In fact, by the time the New Atheism rose up in the

1990s, it was no longer the people with no religion who were an existential threat to America, but now it was the people with too *much* religion, those fundamentalists of all sorts throughout the world, conservative Christians or Islamist jihadists or Ultra-Orthodox Jews, they are the ones who suddenly threatened America, the people with 'too' much religion! Thus, surprisingly the New Atheism of our day portrays itself as being a *more* patriotic group in America than the many fundamentalists are, a thought that would have been unimaginable during Senator McCarthy hearings in the 1950s.

A second factor, Bullivant notes, is the sudden appearance of the internet and the emergence of the Information Age, which made it possible for like-minded people to meet each other online. "If you were brought up in small-town Kansas, you probably weren't going to find other people who were having religious doubts," he suggests. But the internet opened up those spaces for people to discover different ideas and perspectives, to hang out with 'other' people, and get really deep into various religious subcultures.

The internet has been a particularly strong factor for those people leaving the more conservative religions, such as evangelical Protestantism, or American Roman Catholicism, or Mormonism. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is actually the first main example Bullivant uses in his book,

which is surprising because it's such a very tiny percentage of the American population, only around 1.5% of the American people are Mormons.

Bullivant chose it because it's the "canary in the coal mine" story, he believes, - if even the tight-knit Mormon communities are starting to bleed members, then "that shows what a big issue this is for everyone else." The erosion of the cohesive Mormon culture, he said, predicted "the (larger) breakdown of religious subcultures," which has been especially profound in places such as Utah and southern Idaho, and perhaps the American South, where in decades past, a person's entire social and religious life would be spent with members of one's own conservative culture.

The internet chipped away at these religious enclaves. "This was important for many of the Mormons he interviewed, who, for example, were encountering new facts online about Mormon history, facts that they weren't taught in temple. But even more than this, they were starting to hang out with non-Mormons and ex-Mormons, people who are very much *not* in their prior religious group, and that becomes 'this other' world they can inhabit now." In the same way, local State Universities and Community Colleges opened up new information for conservative Christian households across the country that has had a lasting and demonstrative effect upon religion.

So around two-thirds of all the "nones" in the U.S. are "nonverts", Bullivant points out, meaning that they left religion, rather than simply being "cradle nones", people who were born and raised without religion. This dramatic reaction of the increasing "nones" is, thus, against the so-called 'organized religion' of their upbringing and not necessarily against being religious per se. Over time, Bullivant expects that 'cradle nones' will become a larger share of the "none" population, as more Americans are born without a religion, and how will they respond in the future is still unknown. For now, "nones" simply prefer not to be associated with any 'organized' religion, especially the religion they grew up with, like with my children, though I continually remind them that the Church is not really that 'organized!'

The third factor explaining this rapid expansion of the "nones" sounds like circular logic: The "nones" are rising because the "nones" are rising. But human beings are herd creatures, Bullivant explains in the book; we tend to do what our neighbors are doing. With every headline that heralds the seismic shift the nation is experiencing, more people become more comfortable being non-religious, cultural norms have changed. Cultural norms are fluid.

But interestingly Bullivant himself bucks that trend. This 38-year-old English researcher was born into a family with no

religion – “I wasn’t baptized, and that’s normal in Britain, he said” – but he deviated from that path by slowly coming to Catholicism as a student. He was doing the first of his two doctoral degrees (one in theology, another in sociology) when he became friends with some Dominicans, who would regularly invite him for Sunday night dinner. “In order to come to this guest dinner with loads of wine on a Sunday evening, you had to have gone to the Mass beforehand,” he said.

So, he began attending Mass and he was impressed by the people he met, people who were bright and kind, not fanatics at all. It was obvious that they lived what they believed, and many had made great sacrifices in order to become priests. Eventually, one of those friends offered to baptize him. Then, after a three-week research trip to Rome for his dissertation, Bullivant officially joined the Roman Catholic Church. His wife is now also a member, and they are raising their four children as Catholics. --- So now you might better understand why I keep encouraging you all to invite some friends to dinner when we have Evensongs here, making that service the required appetizer! So, your friends can see that we are perfectly sane individuals here at St. John’s, and not religious fanatics! We are just ordinary people struggling with what it means to be religious in our lives today.

Still, it's remarkable that since Bullivant does a lot of work on people leaving Christianity, and he has become one! "For every person in Britain who is raised nonreligious and who then becomes a Christian, there's something like 26 people who go the other way," he notes.

Thus, in conclusion, there has been a rapid recent decline in religious participation in this country, even among the most cohesive religious groups. It's a fact of the modern world, for historical as well as cultural reasons. So, one can begin to wonder whether religions will persist at all in the future, which is, fortunately, the topic for next week's sermon! AMEN.