

THE CASE OF THE RELIGIOUS UNAFFILIATED:
A SOCIO-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION
Simone Twibell, Ph.D. student, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the secularization theory was birthed – namely, the belief that with the onset of modernization and urbanization, religion would cease to shape cultural values and influence societal norms, confining religion to the private sphere of life. The premise of this theory built its foundation on the Enlightenment period, an era during which it was assumed that human reason could establish a perfect society. During the “age of reason,” advances in science, technology, and education promised to dispel the stench of superstition often associated with religion. However, a century later, sociologists realized that religion had not yet vanished from the global spectrum. In fact, the creation of new religious movements in the West, the proliferation of Pentecostal churches in the Global South, and a growing interest in the supernatural everywhere have disseminated religious beliefs around the world.

In the United States, on the other hand, religious affiliation has been on a steady decline in recent years. Many studies have been conducted that focus on this contemporary phenomenon known as “the rise of the nones.” Labeled “nones” because they claim no religious preference, their ranks now total 56 million people and are second in size to evangelical Protestants (Pew Research Center 2015, 11). The Pew Research Center, a public opinion survey agency, asserts that adherents of Christianity have fallen from 78.4% to 70.6% between 2007 and 2014 while the unaffiliated have continued to grow (2015, 3). This research also suggests that the fastest growing number of the unaffiliated consists of members from the Millennial generation (2015, 12).

Without a sacred canopy guaranteeing stability in a volatile society, it is not surprising that established strongholds of conviction have been recently uprooted by a demoralizing wave of confusion. Could this be a sign indicating the rebirth of secularization? Were sociologists premature in their somber predictions? Or is this condition a mere product of globalization in which cultural values are shifting and religious identities have fractured? Although some individuals would point to current trends to support the secularization theory, others are not so quick to cast their lot without a careful analysis of the situation.

Several studies have been performed that identify the possible causes of the barrenness of the religious landscape in the United States. This paper is a timely contribution to this ongoing discourse. As such, it will attempt to describe and analyze the sociological factors involved in the demise of religion, particularly by discerning the behaviors, values, and opinions of the Millennial generation and the way these intersect with the decline of religious affiliation. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to prescribe possible solutions that consider theological or missiological implications. Rather, the intention of the researcher is to establish an initial building block by which the larger categorizations identified may be analyzed in greater detail by future research.

Thus, several questions emerge when considering this pertinent issue. What is the current state of religious affiliation in the United States? What characterizes America’s newest generation and what do they truly value? Why are Millennials turning away from “organized religion”? In order

to answer these questions, this paper has been divided into three parts. The first section provides a brief and general overview of the current religious landscape of the United States, describing the general characteristics of the religious unaffiliated in order to underscore possible reasons for their lack of religious affiliation. The second explores specific characteristics of the Millennial generation, providing further clarification as to their participation (or lack thereof) in organized religion. The final section examines the most distinguishing cultural values of Millennials, taking into consideration the hierarchy of needs proposed by American Psychologist Abraham Maslow.

I. A Changing Religious Landscape

The number of Americans who do not identify with any particular religion continues to grow at a rapid pace. Although America remains substantially a Christian nation according to the most recent study released by the Pew Research Center, the percentage of Americans who claim no particular religious affiliation has increased from 16.1% in 2007 to 22.8% in 2014 (2015, 4). Gallup polls also confirm this finding, showing that the number of the religious unaffiliated has reached an all-time high in 2014 with 16% of the population identifying as such compared to 11% in 2007 (Gallup 2014). A report from the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) describes the 1990s as the decade of the “secular boom” when 1.3 million adults joined the ranks of the nones (2009, 2). Furthermore, fully one in three Millennials claim no religious affiliation today compared to one in four in 2006 (Pew Research 2015, 12; Pew Research 2007, 22). Table 1 shows the percentage of gradual increase of the nones across generations over a span of seven years.

Table 1: *The Religious Unaffiliated Across Generations*

Generation	2007	2014
Silent Generation (65+)	9%	11%
Baby Boomers (50-64)	14%	17%
Generation X (34-49)	19%	23%
Older Millennials (25-33)	25%	34%
Younger Millennials (18-24)	N/A	36%

Source: <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/05/RLS-05-08-full-report.pdf>

Several studies have been conducted that illumine the social identity of the nones and why they claim no religious preference. A particular case was presented a few years ago that built on the concept of *liminality*¹ to describe the state of the nones as those standing halfway in and halfway

¹ The term *liminality* has been borrowed from cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, who uses the word to refer to the middle stage of a ritual process in which the person redefines his identity in terms of ambiguity where he passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or future stages (Turner 1979, 47).

out of a certain religious identity and likely to change their position within a year (Lim 2010, 3). This study argues that many nones still hold a weak tie to some particular religious tradition and may occasionally identify with that tradition, but do not claim to be members of any particular religious group. This position holds that the majority of nones, rather than being secular, are actually liminal and thus their position may change with the passing of time. This liminality creates significant difficulty in adequately assessing the participants' degree of affiliation (Lim 2010, 2). Research indicates that 74% of unaffiliated adults were raised with some religious affiliation (Pew Research 2012, 16), suggesting that their lack of affiliation happened later in life. It is not unreasonable then to assume that many of the "nones" today may be on the fringes of religion due to their disappointment in religion, but may still hold on to spirituality as an important value during different periods in life.

James White, in his seminal work on the "rise of the nones," confirms this presupposition. He affirms that though the nones do not particularly claim to be religious, they still believe in God and consider themselves spiritual (White 2014, 21). Lack of affiliation, therefore, does not point to a lack of religious belief or interest in spirituality. In fact, a series of reports released by the Pew Forum reveals that one third of the unaffiliated say religion is at least somewhat important in their lives and two thirds believe in God (2012, 22). A Gallup poll shares an even more optimistic outlook. Of those individuals asked to rate the importance of religion in their lives, 56% said it was "very important" (Gallup 2014). Despite evident signs of hope for religion, the reality is that 88% of religiously unaffiliated Americans are not seeking to become involved in any formal religion (Pew Research 2012, 24). Hence, the most distinctive characteristic of the unaffiliated is their lack of participation in organized religion. What is causing this shift? What lies behind the nones' lack of desire to affiliate themselves with a religious organization?

In considering this shift, one of the most important factors is generational replacement, the gradual supplanting of older generations by newer ones (Pew Research 2009, 7). This factor, however, does not provide rationale for those in older generations who have also become more unaffiliated in recent years (Pew Research 2012, 16). Other possible reasons have also been identified as root causes for the rise of the unaffiliated, especially among young adults. An article that examines theories of religious change describes the following three: demographic changes, secularization, and the perception that religion is connected with conservative politics (Hout and Fischer 2002, 3-4). A report from the Pew Forum offers four possible theories: political backlash, delays in marriage, social disengagement, and secularization (2012, 29-31). In addition, a study conducted by the Psychology Department of San Diego University found that there might be a few other contributing factors for a decreased interest in religion: the rise of individualism, religious pluralism, the conflict between science and faith, and a generation of "digital natives" heavily involved in online activities that may diminish their interest in religious teachings (Twenge 2015, 14).

If secularization were the source behind this dramatic shift, however, there would be other indicators present as well, such as a significant decrease in religious beliefs or changes in the importance that religion holds in society. However, as previously discussed, this is not the case. Likewise, delays in marriage, social disengagement, and demographic changes may be considered by-products of the rapid social change of our times. These factors may indeed have a correlation with the decline in religious affiliation, but they cannot account for the religious shift alone. There is certainly a possible causation in the relationship between politics and religion as

religion has always played a key role in American politics. In fact, Hout and Fischer suggest that the association between conservative politics and religion has pushed away some moderates and most liberals with weak religious ties (2002, 14). This case suggests that young adults who hold views incompatible with religion may choose to not formally affiliate themselves with conservative religious organizations. By way of illustration, during the 2008 presidential campaign, Millennials supported Barack Obama over John McCain by a margin of 66% to 32% while the votes of older individuals were evenly distributed: 50% to 48% respectively (Pew Research 2015, 70). The fact that the majority of Millennials hold more liberal views provides a valid explanation for choosing not to associate themselves with fundamental or traditional forms of religion. Nonetheless, the political theory is only a valid explanation when juxtaposed with all other social forces that influence the making of a culture.

II. Signs of the Times

Like any other generation, Millennials display general and unique traits. The political, economic, social, and technological influences of the culture in which they were raised have created a lasting impact on their identity formation. Before analyzing the cultural values of the Millennial generation, it is important to note that there are three different effects associated with how a generation tends to process life experiences and determine cultural values. First, the “age effect,” encompassing all the events associated with changes typical to age, plays a determinant role in the manner in which people deal with social change and life experiences. Second, the “period effect” comprises all global events that affect all generations simultaneously, influencing the attitudes and behaviors of individuals (such as the technology revolution). Finally, the “cohort effect” includes all historical events experienced and remembered by one generation more than others (such as a world war), impacting the level of personal and social consciousness.²

Many differences in practices and values between generations are normal indicators of age that tend to repeat themselves with each successive generation. This fact leads us to the conclusion that young people may behave differently from older people today, but they might become more like them tomorrow once they themselves age, ascribing factors in social or religious change to the “age effect.” However, a recent study, led by Psychologist Jean Twenge, compared data from 11 million adolescents (13 to 18 years old) between 1966 and 2014 and concluded that Millennials are the least religious generation of the last six decades. According to Twenge, the “lesser religious orientation is not due to their youth, but instead to their generation and the particular time period” in which they live (Twenge 2015, 13). In other words, their attitude towards organized religion may be described in terms of a shift in cultural values and not simply attributed to being young.

Compared to older generations, Millennials have shown little signs of interest in religious affiliation although they remain fairly traditional in their religious beliefs. Young adults are likely to share beliefs about life after death and the existence of heaven, hell, and miracles with the rest of the American population (Pew Research 2015, 92). Although more than a third of Millennials claim to be unaffiliated, the remainder of religious Millennials (65%) profess being “strong” members of their faith (Pew Research 2010, 8; 2015, 70). What accounts for this contrasting perspective toward religious affiliation? Evaluating the social identity of Millennials

² Ruspini (2002) discusses these effects at length as actions involved in longitudinal research.

may provide further data as to their participation (or lack thereof) in religious groups. However, before providing an overall assessment, a few remarks are necessary.

First, historical and social events must be duly considered to determine the level of influence they exert upon the identity of a generation. Several organizations have created descriptive labels for Millennials based upon the social context from which they have emerged. For example, a research review released by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation on the Millennial generation defines Millennials as “connected, diverse, and optimistic,” attributes that have been “shaped by 9/11, texting, and the recession” (Hendrix and Bitely 2012, 2). Evidently, political events, technological advancements, and economic policies have a tremendous impact on forging a generation’s personality within a nation. A study that analyzes Millennials’ preferences for work environments calls them a “generation of givers, volunteers, and cause activists” (Achieve 2014, 1). Moreover, the latest report on Millennials by the Pew Research Center identifies them as “confident, connected, and open to change” (2010, 1). Without a doubt, the present era, characterized by globalization, neo-liberalism, and technology have shaped the Millennial worldview.

Second, to better understand a specific generation, each cohort must be compared to other generational cohorts in order to account for social change and the aforementioned effects. Although longitudinal studies that assess differences in cohorts are difficult to find, such studies illumine how generational values differ and change over time. For example, surveys conducted in a given year and administered again a decade later may provide interesting insights into how a newer generation differs from the previous generation. One such study found that whereas 64% of Millennials believe they are living in an exciting time, only 50% of the previous generation shared the same sentiments (Pew Research 2007, 9).

Finally, comparative research between generations or among individuals within a specific generation must begin with the measurement of personal values analyzed under the larger umbrella of national cultural values in which the generation exists. A plethora of studies have been conducted in recent years that identify common cultural values among Millennials. For example, a new study released this year concludes that the rise of individualism in the American society (indicated by a more positive view of the self and the need for uniqueness) may have a strong influence in leading Millennials away from religious organizations. Jean Twenge’s research team analyzed the correlation between levels of individualism and religious involvement and found that religious affiliation was low when indicators of individualism were high (Twenge 2015, 13).

Other social scientists, like Anthony Giddens, argue that values like individualism is not the only phenomenon shaping the identity of today’s individuals, but rather, *reflexivity*³ may be guiding the situation and contributing to the disconnect that the youth feel from all inherited traditions, including religious traditions. Thus, in Giddens’ words, “the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change” (1991, 33). This theory provides a framework by which to interpret the social change that today’s individuals

³ In the study of identity, *reflexivity* refers to the human capacity of turning the attention of awareness back on the self. Anthony Giddens affirms that the *reflexivity* of modernity has extended into the core of the self in which the self has become a *reflexive project* (Standford, 1991).

are experiencing –namely, the manner by which they seek to connect social change to their altered saturated self is by this process of reflexivity in which they turn their attention back to their fragmented and saturated self to understand how both the cause and effect affect each other and are intricately and deeply connected. In the next section an in-depth exploration of how Millennials’ identity and cultural values have been reshaped by social change will be briefly assessed.

III. Cultural Values Among Millennials in Light of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

It may not be surprising to learn that the United States holds the highest individualism index globally (Hofstede 2010, 95). This is to be expected in view of the technological advancements that the United States produces every year. The more a person relies on technology, the less that person needs to rely on other societal values, such as community or religion. The level of individualism in a society affects the conceptions of human nature in that society. Abraham Maslow’s famous “hierarchy of human needs” states that in order for a higher need to appear it is necessary that the lower needs be satisfied to a degree. In his categorization, these needs are ordered in a hierarchy from lower to higher as follows: physiological, safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow 1970, 35-46). Considering that the grand majority of Millennials have had the first two needs of Maslow’s hierarchy met, it follows that their concern lies with the latter three desires, exemplified by the following societal functions: social connections, self-expression, and education. This section will briefly discuss these functions as Millennials’ most distinguishing values.

For Millennials, some fulfillment is found in connecting with others face-to-face. Of perhaps even greater importance, however, is the possibility of virtual interconnectedness. With the speed of technological advancements and the plethora of networking sites, Millennials have a tremendous advantage over previous generations who were confined to smaller social circles and a more traditional socialization process. Millennials have outpaced older Americans in all types of internet and cell phone use (Pew Research 2015, 32). Three fourths of Millennials have created a social networking profile compared to half of the members of Generation X (Pew Research 2015, 35). Social networking, in particular, is especially popular among Millennials (Pew Research 2015, 26). This trajectory leads to the assumption that the young are more likely to hold a less biased view toward other ethnicities or races as they become exposed to a wide range of cultures throughout the virtual world. The fact that 39% of Millennials are represented by minorities while 89% of white Americans between 18-25 support interracial relationships may confirm this suspicion (Pew Research 2015, 16; 2007, 40). A cultural tendency called *universalism*,⁴ namely, treating people primarily on the basis of who they are as individuals rather than on the basis of their group affiliation (*exclusivism*), may be at play in this situation. As Millennials align their preference with the former cultural tendency, they may also disregard the necessity to affiliate with the religious organizations of their upbringing.

Millennials are clearly diverse and, as a result, their views on racial issues have also become less partisan. “Belonging” goes beyond maintaining the status quo for Millennials. As indicated by its

⁴ These tendencies are described in *Cultures and Organizations*, a study led by researcher Hofstede among IBM employees in 73 countries that assesses the different ranks and indexes of cultural values nationally.

diversity, this generation is not afraid to make social connections that go beyond the homogeneity of the past. Rather, this younger generation is desperate for meaningful connections. Timothy Tennent, president of Asbury Theological Seminary, believes that Millennials “are recovering the so-called ‘third metric’: that the purpose of life is not found in ‘money’ (metric #1) nor ‘fame’ (metric #2), but in raising a family and serving others” (2015). While only 25% of Millennials are married, among the unmarried 70% affirm their desire for marriage and 74% indicate they want to have children (Pew Research 2011, 3). In the meantime, the cohabitation rate among Millennials ages 18-29 has increased compared to the previous generation at the same age: 12% to 7% respectively (Pew Research 2011, 1). This trend has had an effect on the rate of out-of-wedlock births. Of all births among Millennials in 2008, 51% occurred to unwed mothers (Pew Research 2011, 2).

It cannot be denied that Millennials tend to be more accepting than other generations of a wide range of non-traditional behaviors related to family and parenting. Consistent with these trends, it is perhaps not surprising to find that 73% of Millennials are in favor of legalizing gay marriage compared to 59% of Generation X (ages 34-50), followed by 45% of Boomers (ages 51-69) and 39% of Silents (ages 70-87) (Pew Research 2015b, 1). Their openness to less traditional societal models has left the Millennials longing to create roots elsewhere. An interesting observation in recent years points out that rather than abandoning Christianity, some young people are joining more traditional denominations in search of meaning (Olmstead 2014, 7). In spite of the seeming disengagement from organized religion, 56% of Millennials claim to be Christian (Pew Forum 2015, 94). These religious Millennials are seeking a deeper connection with the sacred through liturgical traditions, a trend that lies at the heart of post-modernism in which an emphasis on mystery and expression are greatly accentuated.

This leads us to a second peculiarity among Millennials: self-expression. Millennials express themselves in unique ways. Twenty percent have posted a video of themselves online, 38% have between one and six tattoos, and roughly 25% have dyed their hair an untraditional color (Hendrix and Bitely 2015, 5; Pew Research 2007, 23). Their self-expression, however, is not constricted only to the physical dimension. In recent years, a surge of secular movements have drawn the attention of thousands of Millennials with the intention of providing a space to share life with others in non-traditional ways. One such movement is “Burning Man,” an annual event located in northern Nevada “dedicated to community, art, self-reliance, and self-expression” (Burning Man 2015). Launching in 1986 with a gathering of only twenty individuals, this event boasted nearly seventy thousand in attendance in 2013 (Burning Man 2015). As a New York Times article comments, “Those who make the pilgrimage may be witnessing the dawn of a new, ecstatic religion” (Johnson 2012). Among the ten guiding principles, created to serve as a reflection of the community’s ethos, are the following: radical inclusion, gifting, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, and participation. The most recent Burning Man census survey shows that over 51% of the participants were represented by Millennials and 72% of all participants reported no religious affiliation (Burning Man 2014, 16, 39). This event provides an outlet for Millennials to share their innovative skills, make social connections with like-minded individuals, and express themselves in contemporary ways. Without a doubt, Burning Man exemplifies the prototype of an ideal religion, offering much while demanding little.

Finally, Millennials search for self-actualization by emphasizing the value of education. Despite the fact that younger Millennials have not yet finished their formal education, Millennials may be on track to emerge as the most educated generation in the history of the United States (Pew Research 2015, 49). For example, the share of Millennials between the ages of 18 and 24 attending U.S. colleges has hit an all time high (Pew Research 2015, 49). In addition, the rate of high school completion has reached its highest level in more than two decades (Hendrix and Bitely 2012, 6). Danny Quanstrom, a pastor in the Church of the Nazarene, surveyed over 400 Nazarene Millennial clergy and found that Millennials are highly educated: 86% of all Millennial clergy have completed a bachelor's degree compared to 75% of all previous generations (2015). With higher levels of education, Millennials are also more prone to reject the fundamentalist aspects of religion. When measuring generational views of the Bible, for instance, young people are less likely to view the Bible as the literal Word of God (Pew Research 2010, 17). Overall, Millennials see education as leading to greater levels of self-actualization.

Conclusion

The Millennial generation is contributing to the rapid religious and social changes that the world's greatest Christian nation is undergoing today. Although Millennials' spiritual beliefs and practices reflect patterns from previous generations, they are becoming far less connected to organized religion. This study sought to investigate possible root causes for the rise of the nones by particularly looking at the value system of Millennials in order to underscore those reasons. This brief analysis suggests several conclusions.

First, more Millennials have joined the ranks of the nones over the course of the last seven years than any other generation. Factors contributing to this development range from demographic changes to changes in political views. Young adults who hold views incompatible with religion may choose to not formally affiliate themselves with conservative religious organizations, which may be one of the greatest indicators for the rise of the nones among the Millennial generation.

Secondly, the identity of Millennials is being shaped by a cultural shift in values spurred by the rise of individualism. The changing socio-political perspective among Millennials has led them to view social connections, self-expression, and education as more valuable than more traditional societal values such as religion, work, and family. Their participation in technology, secular movements like Burning Man, and higher levels of education have contributed to their lack of interest in religious groups, which tend to be characterized by fundamentalism and conservatism.

Finally, Millennials are distinguished by their cultural diversity and openness to the effects of globalization while also desiring to invest their energy in worthwhile causes. It has often fallen to the fields of science and religion to provide mechanisms by which individuals may be aided in this process. In the age of technology, the question becomes: What will religion offer that technology is incapable of providing? Answering this question by taking into consideration the value systems of Millennials will prove to be the task ahead for any religious organization interested in bringing Millennials back to their pews. Religion is never as weak nor as strong as it appears. It may well be that, in the midst of apparent weakness, religion may soon rediscover a stronger pulse in the years ahead.

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