

Most of the unaffiliated just “stopped believing,” according to study

by [Kimberly Winston](#) in the [October 25, 2016](#) issue

A majority of the religiously unaffiliated—the so-called nones—say they fell away from faith not because of any negative experience, but because they “stopped believing,” usually before the age of 30.

Nones now make up 25 percent of the American population, and only 7 percent say they are looking for a religion to belong to at all.

Those are among the findings of a new study of the religiously unaffiliated conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute.

The study challenges the assumption that the unaffiliated are leaving religion because they are offended by religious institutions’ treatment of gay and lesbian people or clergy sexual abuse scandals, said Daniel Cox, PRRI’s research director.

“Those things matter, but they are dwarfed by this central idea that people no longer believe in religious teachings,” he said.

The study, *Exodus: Why Americans Are Leaving Religion—And Why They Are Unlikely to Come Back*, surveyed 2,201 adults this summer. Among the findings were the following:

- Only 18 percent of nones say “religion is important in their lives,” and 40 percent say they are “moderately spiritual.” The majority of the unaffiliated—53 percent—describe themselves as neither religious nor spiritual.
- Sixty percent said they simply “stopped believing” in their childhood religion, while 32 percent cited their family’s lack of religious commitment. Less than a third—29 percent—said negative religious teachings about gay and lesbian people were important to why they left their childhood religion, and 19 percent cited the clergy sexual abuse crisis.
- A majority of nones still believe in God: 22 percent say God is a “person,” while 37 percent see God as “an impersonal force.”
- One in five nones say a belief in God is “necessary” to morality.

But the study, released in late September, includes the contradiction that one in three nones believe children should be raised in a religion to learn “good values.”

And while one-third of all nones say they do not believe in God, only 13 percent accept the label “atheist.”

“There is still stigma attached to the word *atheist*,” Cox said. “I think there is a disinclination to claim the label if they are nonbelievers who just don’t think about religion all that often.”

The study attempts to further define nones by dividing them into three subgroups: the “Rejectionists,” the “Apatheists,” and the “Unattached Believers.”

The Rejectionists are the largest group, at 58 percent of all nones, and agree that religion is “not important” in their lives and “does more harm than good.”

Apatheists—22 percent—say religion is not important to them but isn’t harmful to society, while Unattached Believers—18 percent—say religion is personally important to them.

None of these findings surprise Elizabeth Drescher, a Santa Clara University adjunct professor. In researching her book *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America’s Nones*, Drescher found the religiously unaffiliated seldom mentioned negative experience with religion.

“The way religious education and formation is set up in mainline and Catholic churches parallels high school,” she said. “Once you graduate from it, you got it. You know, don’t be a jerk, do unto others, and nones just kind of get bored with it and move on.”

But what do they move on to? Katherine Ozment, author of *Grace without God: The Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Belonging in a Secular Age* and a none who drifted away from her childhood Presbyterianism, has some ideas.

“It’s not that nones don’t believe in God, it’s that they don’t believe in religious teachings,” she said. “They have detached completely from religion and are finding meaning in their jobs, in raising kids, in their communities, in nature.”

But many, she said, still want a sense of community they once found in church. She believes that’s behind the recent rise of so-called atheist churches like Sunday Assembly and Oasis, which now have branches across the United States and in

several other countries.

“I think there are a lot of nones who miss singing in the choir, who would love to go into a building and hear a moving speech, but the minute someone starts talking about the Bible they check out,” she said. “It no longer feels applicable to them. That’s a big challenge to the church.”

Ed Stetzer, the executive director of the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism at Wheaton College and an expert on evangelicals and leadership, agrees.

While evangelicals know how to appeal to those who still identify as Christians but don’t practice, they do not have the same success relating to the nones, he said. “So I think ultimately there will have to be some retraining about what it means to reach secular people.”

Stetzer takes heart from the study’s finding that more than half of all nones say they believe in some concept of God.

“That’s where the entrée is,” he said. “There is still an awareness that there is a God, and the Christian’s job is now to explain who that God is and what he has done for them.”

The PRRI poll, conducted in partnership with Religion News Service, was funded by the Henry Luce Foundation and the Stiefel Freethought Foundation. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.5 percentage points. —Religion News Service

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