

For many, 'Losing My Religion' isn't a song: It's life

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(RNS) When Ben Helton signed up for an online dating service, under "religion" he called himself "spiritually apathetic."

On Sunday mornings, when Bill Dohm turns his eyes toward heaven, he's just checking the weather so he can fly his 1946 Aeronca Champ two-seater plane.

Helton, 28, and Dohm, 54, aren't atheists. They simply shrug off God, religion, heaven or the ever-trendy search-for-meaning and/or purpose. Their attitude could be summed up as "So what?"

"The real dirty little secret of religiosity in America is that there are so many people for whom spiritual interest, thinking about ultimate questions, is minimal," said Mark Silk, professor of religion and public life at Trinity College in Hartford, Conn.

Clergy and religion experts are dismayed, fearing for souls' salvation and for the common threads of faith snapping in society. Others see no such dire consequences to a more openly secular America as people not only fess up to being faithless but admit they're skipping out on spirituality altogether.

Only now, however, are they turning up in the statistical stream. Researchers have begun asking the kind of nuanced questions that reveal just how big the "So What" set might be:

-- 44 percent told the 2011 Baylor University Religion Survey they spend no time seeking "eternal wisdom," and 19 percent said "it's useless to search for meaning."

-- 46 percent told a 2011 survey by Nashville, Tenn.-based LifeWay Research that they never wonder whether they will go to heaven.

-- 28 percent told LifeWay "it's not a major priority in my life to find my deeper purpose." And 18 percent scoffed at the idea that God has a purpose or plan for everyone.

-- 6.3 percent of Americans turned up on Pew Forum's 2007 Religious Landscape Survey as totally secular -- unconnected to God or a higher power or any religious identity and willing to say religion is not important in their lives.

Hemant Mehta, who blogs as the Friendly Atheist, calls them the "apatheists," while the Right Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde, the new Episcopal bishop of Washington, D.C., calls them honest.

"We live in a society today where it is acceptable now to say that they have no spiritual curiosity. At almost any other time in history, that would have been unacceptable," Budde said.

She finds this "very sad, because the whole purpose of faith is to be a source of guidance, strength and perspective in difficult times. To be human is to have a sense of purpose, an awareness that our life is an utterly unique expression of creation and we want to live it with meaning, grace and beauty."

Nah, Helton said.

Helton, a high school band teacher in Chicago, only goes to the Roman Catholic Church of his youth to hear his mother sing in the choir.

His mind led him away. The more Helton read evolutionary psychology and neuropsychology, he said, the more it seemed to him, "We might as well be cars. That, to me, makes more sense than believing what you can't see."

Ashley Gerst, 27, a 3-D animator and filmmaker in New York, shifts between "leaning to the atheist and leaning toward apathy."

"I would just like to see more people admit they don't believe. The only thing I'm pushy about is I don't want to be pushed. I don't want to change others, and I don't want to debate my view," she said.

Most "So Whats" are like Gerst, said David Kinnaman, a Christian researcher and author of "You Lost Me," a book on young adults drifting away from church.

They're uninterested in trying to talk a diverse set of friends into a shared viewpoint in a culture that celebrates an idea that all truths are equally valid, he said. Personal experience and personal authority matter most, and as a result Scripture and tradition are quaint, irrelevant, artifacts.

"'Spiritual' is the hipster way of saying they're concerned with social injustice. But if you strip away the hipster factor," said Kinnaman, "I'd estimate seven in 10 young adults would say they don't see much influence of God or religion in their lives at all."

The hot religion statistical trend of recent decades was the rise of the "Nones" -- the people who checked "no religious identity" on the American Religious Identification Survey -- who leapt from 8 percent in 1990 to 15 percent in 2008.

The "So Whats" appear to be a growing secular subset. The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life's Landscape Survey dug in to the Nones to discover that nearly half said they believed "nothing in particular."

Neither raging atheist scientist Richard Dawkins, author of numerous best-sellers such as "The God Delusion," nor religious broadcaster Pat Robertson would understand this fuzzy stance, said Barry Kosmin, co-author of the ARIS and director of the Institute for the Study of Secularism at Trinity College.

"But a lot of these people are concerned more with the tangible, the real stuff like mortgages or their favorite football team or the everyday world," Kosmin said.

When church historian Diana Butler Bass researched her upcoming book, "Christianity After Religion," she found the "So Whats" are "a growing category."

"We can't underestimate the power of the collapse of institutional religion in the first 10 years of this century," she said. "It's freed so many people to say they don't really care. They don't miss rituals or traditions they may never have had anyway."