

Nones against none-ism?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Last week [Pew released some more data](#) from its spring survey on the rise of the nones. They asked people if they thought the growing number of "people who are not religious" is good, bad or neutral for American society. One interesting finding: while most of the nones said neutral, nearly as many said "bad" as "good." Almost a fifth of the nones think the growth of the nones—of their own group—is bad for society.

Lots of people seem surprised by this finding. Atheist blogger Hemant Mehta is one; he calls it "weird" and goes on to say he [sees it primarily as a problem of how people perceive what it means to not be religious](#). "People ought to be proud of being non-religious," Mehta says. Matthew Brown [suggests that even the non-religious might appreciate the positive influence of religion on other people](#), pointing to [this Baylor study on criminal behavior among young adults](#).

There's no question in my mind that religion can have a positive influence on people, and I certainly don't want atheists or anyone else to feel ashamed. But I had a different reaction. It's often said that people no longer patronize public libraries much—at least, not for anything more than the web connection and the bathroom—yet also don't want to live somewhere that doesn't have one. Maybe they want the library to be there for other people to use; maybe they're ashamed at how few books they read anymore.

Could be. But maybe others used to feel a need for the library and wish they still did. Maybe it's not shame or apathy they're feeling but longing and regret. And maybe some of them hope to yet recover the ability and discipline to get lost in a good book.

As many have pointed out, the rise of the nones speaks in part to the loss of religious affiliation as a default cultural ID marker: some of the nones were always essentially nones but are freer than ever to say so. But the fact that they're honest about it doesn't necessarily mean that they're happy or complacent about it; nones and seekers aren't mutually exclusive. So it's pretty intuitive to think that some people will

admit to a researcher that they're nones even though they wish they—and others—were not.