

**Discussing the ‘Nones’:
What They Say about the Category of Religion and American Society
AAR Panel Session
November 25, 2013, 4:00 – 6:00 pm**

The label “nones” typically refers to those who report on surveys that they have no religious affiliation. The October 2012 Pew Forum report “Nones on the Rise” (<http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>) emphasized the increasing number of Americans who report no religious affiliation, but the Pew Forum did not create the nones classification. The decades-old label goes back at least to Glenn M. Vernon, who used it in a 1968 article “The Religious ‘Nones’: A Neglected Category” (*J. for the Scientific Study of Religion* 7:2 (Autumn, 1968), pp. 219-229). Citing various studies referencing those without religious affiliation, he connects the term to “the last category, following ‘Catholic, Jew . . .’, in a list headed by ‘Religion’” (219). In a footnote he states that those who fall into this statistical category include “atheists, agnostics, those with ‘no preference,’ those with no affiliation, and also members of small groups and others who . . . more properly belong in a residual or ‘other’ category” (219, fnote 1). In discussing other studies, though, he implicitly connects nones with “atheists,” “militant secularists,” and “agnostics” (221). He further describes the “religious” activities of some nones, declaring, “It seems as inaccurate to consider all ‘nones’ to be ‘of one piece’ as it is to consider all Methodist to be alike in all religious matters” (224).

This inconsistency of categories that Vernon shifts between has remained, as the term is malleable, to say the least. The 2008 American Religious Identification Survey report generally equated nones/unaffiliated with the secular and nonreligious (Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, “American Nones: Profile of the No Religion People” http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/08/NONES_08.pdf). In addition to the October 2012 Pew Forum report on the US, the Pew Forum asserted, “This makes the unaffiliated the third largest religious group worldwide” in a December 2012 Global Religious Landscape report (<http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>). Another recent survey reporting on the unaffiliated is the Public Religion Research Institute’s 2013 Economic Values Survey (<http://www.publicreligion.org>), which, like the earlier Pew report, acknowledges the diversity among those they label as nones.

Aspects of academic discourse reinforce the malleability of the category. Michael Hout and Claude Fischer use the phrase “no religious preference” in their analysis of the factors that led to the doubling of those reporting no religious preference between 1991 and 1998 (“Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference” *American Sociological Review* 67:2 (June 2002):165-190). Their analysis of the political nature of the no religious preference response as a reaction to the rise of the political right references the nones and is oft cited in discussions of the nones. With a focus on changing patterns of religion in the Pacific Northwest (PNW), Patricia Killen and Mark Silk’s *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone* assisted in putting the nomenclature ‘None Zone’ on the academic terrain. In this text, Killen & Silk begin to empirically identify who the Nones are, what shapes their thought and action, and the manner in which they think about and practice religion and spirituality. Here, they suggest that this group is the fastest growing group in the United States, and although they’re not defined by religious affiliation, they more often than not hold rather orthodox religious

convictions. Similar to the recent portrait and landscape of those referred to as Nones, Killen & Silk find that this group is well educated, are quite concerned about environmental issues, and put forth strong ethical considerations in reimagining what humanity ought to look like. In this regard – they are, according to Silk & Killen, spiritual but not religious. A 2012 volume of *Journal of Contemporary Religion* focused on “Interdisciplinary Studies of Non-religion and Secularity” cites Vernon as the pioneering study but incorporates work on nones, atheism, secularism, and unchurched that reflects the conflation of non-religion and secularity in several institutes dedicated to those topics (27:1 (January 2012)). The 2009 analysis by Joseph Baker and Buster Smith equates no religious preference with non-affiliation (“The Nones: Social Characteristics of the Religiously Unaffiliated” *Social Forces* 87:3 (March 2009):), while a 2013 article entitled “The Non-Religious Patriarchy” conflates the non-religious label with atheist movements (which includes humanist, skeptic, and atheist self-identifiers) while later distinguishing nones from atheists (Ashley F. Miller, *Crosscurrents* (June 2013) 211-226).

The malleability of the label nones further enters public discourse as various media and social organizations find the term useful for their own ends. Various leaders of secular, humanist, and atheist organizations have expressed interest in building politically on the increase of nones (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/on-faith/wp/2013/10/23/is-atheism-winning-the-culture-war/> and <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/01/25/none-leaders-to-chart-path-for-more-political-cultural-power-for-religiously-unaffiliated/>). A *New York Times* piece contributed by Samuel Freedman equates humanists and nones in analyzing the response to the Sandy Hook school shooting in December 2012 (www.nytimes.com/2012/12/29/us/on-religion-where-are-the-humanists.html?_r=0). The only member of the US Congress who self-identifies as a none has specifically distanced herself from the atheist or nontheist label that some have placed on her (<http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/01/08/my-take-atheist-isnt-a-dirty-word-congresswoman/>).

Other surveys addressing unaffiliated or no religious preference

- General Social Survey (1972-2012) <http://www3.norc.umd.edu/GSS+Website/>
- 2006-2009 Baylor Religion Survey <http://www.baylorisr.org/>
- 2006-2012 Portraits of American Life Survey <http://www.thearda.com/pals/>

Panelist contributions to the discourse on the nones

- Sean McCloud - http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sean-mccloud/nones-somes-and-the-combinativeness-of-american-religious-practices-b_2784390.html
- Monica Miller - http://www.huffingtonpost.com/steven-ramey/meaningless-surveys-the-f_b_4225306.html (co-authored with Steven Ramey)
- Steven Ramey - http://www.huffingtonpost.com/steven-ramey/what-happens-when-we-name-the-nones_b_2725169.html