

# Sociology of Atheism

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## Unaffiliated, Yet Religious: A Methodological and Demographic Analysis

*Gina A. Zurlo and Todd M. Johnson*

The mid-twentieth-century secularization theory – that an increase in modernity means a decrease in religion – has been largely debunked (see Berger 2014). Despite increased modernity the world has in fact become *more* religious; 80.8% of the global population self-identified with a religion in 1970, rising to 88.1% in 2010 and with a projected increase to 91.5% by 2050 (see table 2; Johnson and Grim 2015). At the same time, the boundaries between religion and non-religion (atheism and agnosticism) are becoming increasingly blurred. As this chapter discusses, many surveys have reported that individuals are leaving institutionalized religion and becoming part of what is known as the “unaffiliated”. But who exactly are the unaffiliated (also called the “nones”)? The category of the unaffiliated has become ubiquitous in both social scientific and popular language, yet the term suffers from a lack of clarity and nuance. In many studies, the term is conflated with the non-religious, leaving a serious gap in understanding of the religious leanings of the majority of the “nones”.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the issue of international perspective is important – what “increased secularism” means is different in the United States than in, for example, Indonesia or Kenya. It can refer to, among other variables, a decrease in attendance at religious services, changes on particular ethical issues, or self-identifying as non-religious.

The purpose of this chapter is to nuance the category of the unaffiliated to interpret the whole in its various parts: atheists, agnostics, and – counter-intuitively – religionists. Doing so requires looking beyond survey measures and engaging with other types of source material that reveal a different, more complicated, picture. Ethnographic studies, data from religious communities, and on-the-ground reports provide a more complex picture of who the unaffiliated are and, perhaps more importantly, are not. Inaccurate measurement of the “religious nones” also affects data reporting on the size and structure of

<sup>1</sup> For example, Ronald Lindsay cites data from the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) and the Pew Research Center without critique or explanation, equating Pew’s “nones” with ARIS’s “lack of belief in God”, despite Pew’s own reporting of the actual religious beliefs and practices of the “nones” (Lindsay 2014: 13–14).

other world religions. The fundamental issue is how researchers use differing survey instruments and data gathered from these instruments to estimate the numbers of adherents of various religions.

### Sources of Demographic Data on Religion

Three major sources for demographic data on religion worldwide are censuses, surveys/polls, and data from religious communities (see Johnson and Grim 2013: Chapter 7). Governmental censuses are the most comprehensive way of enumerating a country's population. They generally are administered every 10 years, with data released in the 3–5 years following. The frequency of censuses allows for calculation of relatively accurate growth rates and comparisons of numerous variables from decade to decade. However, not all countries ask a religion question on their censuses. In the twentieth century about half the world's countries asked a religion question, but starting in the 1990s increasing numbers of countries began dropping the question, deeming it to be too controversial, too expensive, or uninteresting. Other countries assume their populations to be adherents of a single religion, such as 100% Muslim in Turkey or 100% Christian in Samoa, making a religion question seem irrelevant. In 2014 the International Crisis Group urged the government of Myanmar (Burma) to drop questions they deemed “needlessly antagonistic and divisive,” such as those related to religion, ethnicity, and citizenship status, due to conflicts between Buddhists (the majority) and minority groups such as Rohingya Muslims (Michaels and Yen Snaing 2014). About half of recent censuses asked a question on religion, including those of 14 of 27 countries in the European Union.<sup>2</sup>

Censuses do have limitations as a major source of demographic data, however. Respondents, especially those from lower social classes and persecuted religious minorities, might not feel completely free to be honest in answering questions. This was the case with India's latest census, in 2011. As of mid-2015 the data had not yet been released, but some observers speculate that the government purposely over-states the Hindu population to mask the realities of growing Muslim and Christian (minority religion) populations (Jagannathan 2015). In addition, the religion question offers members of Scheduled Castes only Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist as choices for religious affiliation, while members of Scheduled Tribes can indicate any religion. “No religion” or “atheist” is

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<sup>2</sup> Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, United Kingdom.

not an option in either case (Ghosh and Singh 2015). Exactly who is counted by the census is also an issue of concern. While the purpose of the census is to enumerate the entire country's population, officials in each state decide who exactly is a resident of their state. Does a state's population include non-legal residents, temporary workers, those temporarily living abroad, and/or "undocumented" religious minorities? Residents in Italy, for example, are defined as individuals who plan to stay in the country for more than three months; this includes foreigners working in Italy, seasonal workers, and students. In India, an individual is considered a resident if s/he is present in-country for an aggregate period of 182 days or more, or within the four years prior had been in India for more than 365 days or more. Ultimately, data from a national census are useful in demographic studies only to the extent that they reflect the entire population of a country and that they do so accurately.

An additional limitation of censuses is that offering only a set list of responses to a question, such as on religion, can force those being surveyed to choose an answer that might not be entirely accurate. The result can be over-estimates for listed religious affiliations, since some of those choosing a religion might not actually practice it. This is especially true when the lists deliberately exclude adherence to religions that are not recognized by the government, such as atheism in Indonesia, Afghanistan, and Yemen (International Humanist and Ethical Union 2012). Even the option to write in a response can be ineffective when it is coupled with a series of set choices. In 2001, for example, many Jains in the United Kingdom chose "Hindu" from a list of religious affiliations on the census instead of writing in "Jain", resulting in an undercounting of Jains and an over-counting of Hindus. The Institute of Jainology launched a campaign to encourage Jains to write in their religion in order to break the 10,000-adherent barrier that would allow them "minority religion" status and afford them access to jobs and other benefits. In 2011 the number of Jains reported in the census was 20,288, up from around 7,000 in 2001, gaining them minority religion status (Office for National Statistics 2012). On the other hand, non-response can also be a problem. Failure to answer a question on religious affiliation can result in underestimates for larger religions as well as minority ones.

Censuses also ask about ethnicity, which can be helpful in the absence of questions on religion. This is particularly the case when a strong association exists between membership in an ethnic group and adherence to a particular religion. For example, because 99% of Somalis in Somalia are Muslim, it is often safe to assume that Somalis who live in other countries are part of the Muslim community there as well. Questions on country of birth can also be helpful, especially in countries receiving a large number of international migrants, such as the United States. Of course, using ethnicity questions to make

correlations with religious affiliation has obvious limitations. It is not always true that emigrants adhere to a particular religion in the same proportion as those in their home country. For example, Palestinian Arabs are less than 2% Christian in Palestine, but in the United States they are 30% Christian and in Australia 70% Christian (i.e., Palestinian Arabs abroad are more Christian than those who are in Palestine; Johnson and Zurlo 2015). Therefore, data on country of birth must be used judiciously when trying to estimate religious adherence. For example, 67% of the population of Nepal is Hindu, and 76% of Nepalis in Nepal are Hindu. Only 43% of the population is ethnically Nepali and only 49% of Hindus in Nepal are Nepali, however, so that just 33% of Nepal's population is Nepali Hindus (Johnson and Zurlo 2015). Consequently, extrapolating from Nepal as country of birth to either Hindu as religion or Nepali as ethnicity, and especially to both, in other countries is risky without knowledge of emigration patterns from Nepal.

Large-scale demographic surveys are less comprehensive than national censuses but can produce demographic profiles of countries, states, provinces, and regions. Surveys choose random locations for samples, which can range from a few hundred respondents to several thousand depending on the total population. Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) are some of the most valuable nationally-representative data on religion, administering surveys to between 5,000 and 30,000 households over multiple time points. Yet as valuable as surveys are, their small sample sizes generally exclude smaller religions. For example, the United States census does not ask a religion question, so researchers depend on national surveys and polls such as the American Religious Identity Survey (ARIS), those from the Pew Research Center, and the General Social Survey (GSS). As a result, it is extremely difficult to ascertain the country's Hindu, Zoroastrian, or Sikh populations because these religious communities are comparatively small.

Many religious communities themselves engage in detailed data collection and analysis, with the results published in either general reports, such as the annual *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* (Lindner 2010; Carroll 1916), or in handbooks from particular Christian traditions, such as the Roman Catholic Church's *Annuario Pontificio* (Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana). Many denominations, including the Southern Baptist Convention, Assemblies of God, Presbyterian Church (USA), and Church of the Nazarene, release annual statistical reports with demographics, religious behavior and practices, ecclesiastical jurisdiction and structures, personnel and lay workers, finance, and religious beliefs and attitudes. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints keeps extensive membership reports that include the numbers of seminarians, missionaries, and languages of church

materials. In 2012 the church released a full-color atlas of history and demography, *Mapping Mormonism* (Plewe et al. 2012). Jewish demography is a very well-developed academic field; the *American Jewish Yearbook* has published data on Jewish affiliation almost every year going back to 1899 (Adler 1899; Dashefsky and Sheskin 2015; Rebhum and Lederhendler 2015; DellaPergola 2010).

Data collected from religious communities have a number of limitations as well. Western vs. Eastern definitions of “membership” can be very different; many Asians, for example, consider themselves adherents of many religions, while a Western understanding of religious affiliation historically has been limited to one tradition. The desire of adherents for their religion to seem larger than it really is presents another potential drawback. While organizations (such as Jehovah’s Witnesses) sometimes have an incentive for overstating their figures, no organization (religious or otherwise) can realistically sustain the reporting of inflated numbers (Phillips and Cragun 2011).

Phil Zuckerman’s oft-cited overview of global atheism highlights the inconclusive results derived from consulting only quantitative sources that explicitly ask about religion (Zuckerman 2007). He highlights major findings from various social science surveys conducted around the world, but in the end cannot conclusively state how many atheists are identified in any of them, apart from wide estimated ranges. In addition, his analysis includes those who identify as agnostics and non-believers in a “personal God”, neither of which are necessarily strict atheists. The conclusion is a rather unsatisfying statement that, globally, between 500 and 750 million people do not believe in God – a range of 250 million people (approximately the entire population of Indonesia; Zuckerman 2007).

### Asking the Question

Data collected from censuses, surveys, and polls depend heavily on the wording of questions. Censuses typically take a one-step approach, while surveys take a two-step approach. For example, the 2011 Ireland census asked, “What is your religion?”, with choices from a set list (Roman Catholic, Church of Ireland [Anglican], Islam, Presbyterian, Orthodox, two rows for “other” [write in], and no religion). The Humanist Association of Ireland suggested changing the question to “Do you have a religion?” in order to make it more fair for non-religious responders. Their campaign failed for the 2011 census but continues looking toward 2016 (Humanist Association of Ireland n.d.). Their request was rejected on the claim that it would make historical comparisons with past census data difficult. While the wording “Do you have a religion?” is



probably better, it does make cross-national, as well as historical, comparisons more difficult.

The differences in method often result in differences in data. One example of this is the 1999 Bulgarian European Values Survey versus the 2001 Bulgarian census (Grim and Hsu 2011). The 2001 Bulgarian census asked a one-step question for religious affiliation (figure 1):

16. Faith:	
1.	Orthodox
2.	Catholic
3.	Protestant
4.	Sunni Muslim
5.	Shi'a Muslim
6.	Other _____
99.	None given

FIGURE 1  
2001 Bulgarian census religion question (English translation)

Respondents were asked to choose from a set list, with one option for write-in (“other”). “None given” appears at the bottom, but this choice is unclear in terms of whether respondents have no religion or are choosing simply not to state their religion.

Two years earlier, the 1999 Bulgarian European Values Survey took a two-step approach to identifying respondents’ religious affiliation. The survey first asked, “Do you have a religious affiliation?” (figure 2).

V101 22	Do you have a religious affiliation?
A	Yes → go to question 23
B	No → go to question 24a

FIGURE 2  
1999 Bulgarian European Values survey religion question, step 1 (English translation)

If respondents indicated yes, they were then asked which one, with options from a set list (figure 3).

V102 23	Which one?
Orthodox	1
Muslim	2
Catholic	3
Protestant	4
Other _____	5

FIGURE 3  
1999 Bulgarian European Values survey religion question, step 2 (English translation)

Neither the census nor the EVS offered responses for atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular. It might be assumed that “none given” means not religious,

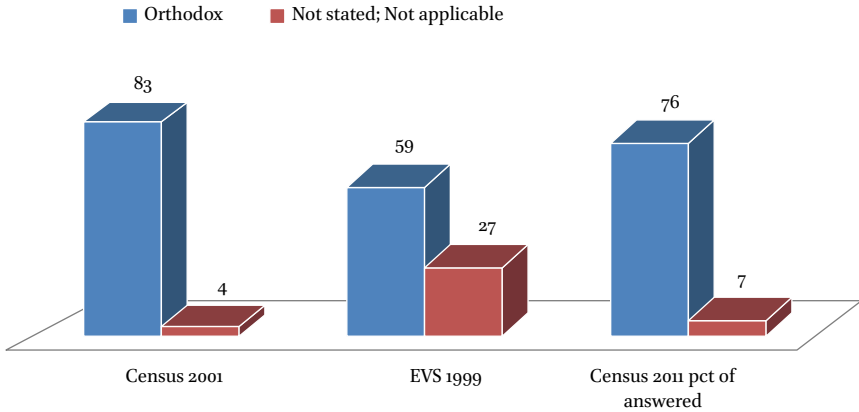


FIGURE 4 *Bulgaria census vs. survey results*

but in reality it likely indicates a “nothing in particular” response instead. The first step of the EVS gives indication of religion vs. no religion, but it does not differentiate between atheist and agnostic. The different ways of asking the question yielded different results.

The 2001 census showed that Bulgaria was 83% Orthodox Christian and 4% not stated, while the 1999 EVS reported 59% Orthodox and 27% answered “no” to the first question (see figure 4 above). These two examples show that using a two-step method, respondents appeared more likely to choose no religion when given the explicit choice. When not given a choice (except a write-in option, which is less likely to be used by respondents), many people choose a religion for a variety of reasons. In the case of Bulgaria, it could be because of the deep-seated history of Orthodox Christianity in the country, fear of not being part of the majority, and/or social bias against being non-religious.

Another methodological consideration especially in cross-national surveys is the terminology used across different languages in asking for religious affiliation. For instance, the International Social Survey Programme 2008: Religion III (ISSP 2008) surveyed 39 countries and asked the religion question in 39 different ways (see table 1 for examples). Each of these can be interpreted as asking a different question, or questions.

This raises a larger linguistic issue of definition of terms: does “belonging” mean the same as “affiliation”, or “preference”?

### Starting Points for Understanding the Unaffiliated

The authors of this article understand the “unaffiliated” to include not only atheists and agnostics but also Christians and other religionists. At the most

TABLE 1 *Wording of ISSP 2008 religion question*

Country	Question	Problem
Czech Republic	“What is your religious affiliation?”	Assumes having a religious affiliation
Turkey	“What religion, if any, were you raised in?”	Technically is asking for religion of childhood, not current
Poland	“Which religion, church or denomination do you feel related to?”	Christian bias
Venezuela	“Do you consider yourself as belonging to a religion? If you belong to a religion, please indicate which one.”	Definition of “belonging”; Does it mean membership?
Russia	“What is your religious preference? To what church do you belong?”	Assumes belonging to a religion; Christian bias

Source: ISSP 2008.

basic level, atheists are individuals who do not believe there is a God or higher power. This category includes people who self-identify as atheists, skeptics, irreligious, and humanists. They generally self-identify on surveys as having “no religion” and choose “do not believe in God” when asked. Agnostics profess no religion, are indifferent to religion, and/or believe that there is no way of knowing whether or not God or a higher power exists. Like atheists, they self-identify as “no religion” on surveys. In this article, atheists and agnostics together constitute “non-religionists”, while the term “religionists” is used to describe all people who are not atheists or agnostics.

Christians can be conceptualized in two categories: affiliated and non-affiliated.<sup>3</sup> Affiliated Christians are persons belonging to or connected with organized churches, whose names appear on the churches’ books, records, or rolls (i.e., church members). Non-affiliated Christians are those who publicly profess Christianity but who are not church members, who are not attached to organized Christianity, and/or who have rejected institutionalized Christianity while retaining Christian beliefs and values despite not being connected to the corporate life of a church (Johnson and Zurlo 2015). A basic premise of this article is that many non-affiliated Christians check “no religion” when asked

3 The term “unaffiliated Christians” is used in the *World Religion Database* but replaced here with “non-affiliated Christians” to differentiate it with “unaffiliated” in surveys.

on a census or survey because they are not members of churches. They do not have “no religion” in the same way atheists and agnostics do. Rather, in their own understanding they profess belief in God and/or other Christian values but choose to be disconnected from institutionalized Christianity for a variety of reasons.

### Who are the Unaffiliated?

An individual's religious affiliation can be uncovered in two primary ways: by belief (or lack of belief) and by self-identification. Most survey researchers and demographers find self-identification to be not only a more rigorous and accurate depiction of affiliation, but also more respectful in that it puts the power of definition in the hands of the respondent, not the researcher (Johnson and Grim 2013; Chapter 5). Self-identification focuses less on the religious practices of individuals and more on how they perceive themselves. Yet, self-identification rests on more than simply a single question about religious affiliation. If someone defines herself as “nothing in particular” on a religion questionnaire, but indicates in other measures that she prays every day, attends religious services weekly, believes in God, and gives money to a church (for example), she does not seem particularly non-religious – she appears to be religious. The methods of the Pew Research Center, Win/Gallup, World Values Survey, and the *World Religion Database* all rest upon self-identification measures.

The Pew Research Center's 2012 report, “Nones' on the Rise”, brought new attention to the non-religious in the United States (Funk and Smith 2012). While much of the media – as well as non-religious advocacy groups – honed in on the fact that the “unaffiliated” category was growing, Pew stressed their finding that most unaffiliated adults had religious or spiritual leanings. According to the Pew survey, 68% of the unaffiliated said they believed in God; more than a third described themselves as “spiritual but not religious”; and 21% said they prayed every day. This report provided evidence that people who check “nothing in particular” are not uniformly non-religious; many are individuals who are unaffiliated with traditional religious structures like churches or synagogues but still engage in religious practices and hold religious beliefs. A substantial body of evidence indicates that individuals are increasingly disaffiliating with institutionalized religion, especially Christianity in the West, but not abandoning their faith altogether (see Kinnamon 2011; Barna and Kinnaman 2014; Evans 2015; Setzer, Stanley, and Hayes 2009). Packard and Hope, in a study involving 100 in-depth questionnaires, found that many people who might commonly be classified as “nones” are actually what they call “dones”: people

who have intentionally left the church, deciding that their spiritual lives are better off without it (Packard and Hope 2015). One respondent's comments summarized the experiences of many people who have left the church: "I retained my Christian affiliation but not my affiliation with Christians" (Packard and Hope 2015: 49). Few of those who had left self-identified as atheist, agnostic, or non-religious, yet these are the kinds of individuals who would check "none" or "nothing in particular" on a survey's religion question. They disavowed traditional church structures and Christian community, not God or belief.

However, the opposite can also be true: non-religious people can be found in religious categories. This is especially the case where religion has very deep-seated religious roots in a culture, such as with Christianity in Europe, Islam in the Middle East, Hinduism in India, and Buddhism in South-east Asia. "Cultural religion" is a vivid reality that must be taken into account when trying to ascertain the numeric strength of atheism and agnosticism in a country, but is generally not considered more important than self-identification measures (Zuckerman 2008). Britain added a religion question to its census in 2001 for the first time since 1851, resulting in a dispute over who was actually checking "Christian". The British Humanist Association argued that people baptized as infants were claiming to be Christian when in reality they were non-religious. In 2001 around 15% of respondents self-identified as non-religious, while in 2011 25.1% declared non-religious.<sup>4</sup> However, it is unlikely that the increase was driven by actual changes in religious identity from "religious" to "non-religious" over the ten-year period; more likely is the success of the campaign by the British Humanist Association to encourage non-religious people to self-identify as such on the census and disengage from "cultural Christianity" (see Voas and Day 2007).<sup>5</sup> These illustrations show the importance of measuring religious identification using multiple methods.

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4 The unfortunate reality for demographers in this case was that the wording of the religion question was not consistent between 2001 and 2011, making direct comparisons difficult (see Johnson and Grim 2013: 166).

5 Leading up to the 2011 census, the British Humanist Association ran a campaign encouraging people to check the "no religion" box, believing that the 2001 census had underestimated the non-religious community by half. However, the waters are murky. The question "I believe in some kind of higher power but not in any organised religion – what should I tick [on the census]?" on the BHA's Frequently Asked Questions webpage is met with a response that, in essence, advises that under those circumstances, "no religion" might be the most appropriate answer to the religion question. This encouragement of people who believe in "some kind of higher power" to self-identify with "no religion" illustrates the likelihood that some respondents in the "no religion" category were counted as non-religious when by other measures they would instead be considered religious. See <http://census-campaign.org.uk/faq/>.

In 2015 Pew released two major demographic reports, one on global religious projections (Hackett, Connor, Stonawski, and Skirbekk 2015) and the other on the American religious landscape (Smith 2015). Globally, Pew projected that the unaffiliated will shrink from 16% of the world's population in 2010 to 13% by 2050 (Hackett, Connor, Stonawski, and Skirbekk 2015: 9). In the American report, Pew stated that between 2007 and 2014, the unaffiliated in the United States had grown from 16% to 22% of the total population. These sets of data are not contradictory and they do offer a sense of changing religious trends on both the global and national levels. However, Pew's usage of the term "unaffiliated" in all of their reports suffers from a lack of clarity in that it lumps together atheists, agnostics, and people who checked "nothing in particular" on a survey question – three very different perspectives on religious affiliation. Grouping these three categories together provides only a fuzzy view of who is "leaving" religion and what that "leaving" looks like.

On the global level, Pew states that it is not possible to break out atheists, agnostics, and those responding "nothing in particular" because in many countries censuses and demographic surveys do not separate the groups as distinct populations (Hackett, Connor, Stonawski, and Skirbekk 2015: 9). The situation is different for some countries, however, including the United States, where in 2014 Pew reported that the population was 3.1% atheist, 4.0% agnostic, and 15.8% nothing in particular (Smith 2015: 4). It is not only possible, but likely, based on evidence from the "Nones" on the Rise report (Funk and Smith 2012: 42), that the "nothing in particular" are individuals who are religious yet are not affiliated with religious institutions. For instance, Pew has indicated that the many of the unaffiliated globally do in fact hold religious or spiritual beliefs. As was mentioned previously, survey results indicate that 68% of the unaffiliated in the United States believe in God or a higher power, as do 38% of unaffiliated adults in France and 7% of unaffiliated Chinese (Hackett, Connor, Stonawski, and Skirbekk 2015: 231–245). From an operational, demographic perspective, putting individuals who believe in a higher power in the same category as those who adamantly deny the existence of a higher power is highly incongruous.

In Pew's 2015 American religion survey, respondents were asked a series of questions in order to obtain their religious affiliation. The first, Q.E1, asked, "What is your present religion, if any?", followed by a set list of possible replies (Smith 2015: 150). If respondents replied "nothing in particular", "none", or "no religion", they were further asked if they were atheist, agnostic, or "just nothing in particular" (i.e., unaffiliated). If respondents indicated "something else" or "don't know", or refused to answer, they were specifically asked if they considered themselves to be Christian. This was followed by a quite rigorous set of

questions concerning Christianity to discern a respondent's denominational affiliation. Respondents who chose "nondenominational" were asked additional questions to ascertain the *kind* of nondenominational church (evangelical, fundamentalist, charismatic, etc.). On the other hand, although atheist, agnostic, and nothing in particular are teased out in the actual survey methodology, these three categories were collapsed in reporting.

Win/Gallup's International End of Year Survey 2014 asks two questions on religion. One of them, D6, asks "Do you consider yourself:" followed by the choices Roman Catholic, Russian or Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, Other Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Other, Atheist/agnostic, and Refused/Don't know/Did not answer. For the United States, 12% of respondents identified as Atheist/agnostic and 8% as Refused/Don't know/Did not answer; 9% chose Other. Problematically, this question conflates atheists and agnostics into a single category. Win/Gallup attempts to overcome this limitation by including Q9: "Irrespective of whether you attend a place of worship or not, would you say you are", with choices of, A religious person; Not a religious person; A convinced atheist; Do not know/no response. Here, 56% claimed to be religious, 33% not religious, and 6% atheist; 5% said they did not know or refused to answer (Gallup International Association n.d.). Comparing the two questions (D6 and Q9) to uncover who is atheist, agnostic, or something else is difficult. Are 6% of respondents atheists and 6% agnostic? If so, where do the 33% "not religious" fall? The categories are confusing and the results are drastically different from those reported by Pew.

The World Values Survey (wvs) asks a variety of questions on religious affiliation, beliefs, and practices, ranging from how important religion is in one's life, to religious denomination, to how often one attends religious services (World Values Survey Wave 6 2010-2014). Wave 6 surveyed more than 84,000 people in nearly 100 countries. The self-identification question reads, "Do you belong to a religion or religious denomination? If yes, which one?", followed by options from a set list (which varies depending on the country) that includes "none" and "other". Globally, 19.4% of respondents chose "none"; "agnostic" and "atheist" are not choices in any country's questionnaire. However, another measure aims at specifically identifying atheists and agnostics: "Independently of whether you attend religious services or not, would you say you are: A religious person; Not a religious person; An atheist" (with "No answer" and "Don't know" as unread options). This measure reported 5.4% atheist and 26.2% "not a religious person" (possibly agnostic) globally. The highest atheist percentages were found in Hong Kong (55.0%), China (27.0%), South Korea (29.5%), Taiwan (17.2%), and Australia (16.3%). These are extraordinarily high figures for atheists compared to the rest of the world.

### Method of the *World Religion Database*

The *World Religion Database* (*WRD*) of Boston University's Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs consists of a taxonomy of religions that includes 18 major categories of world religions, two of which are atheists and agnostics (see Grim, Johnson, Zurlo, and Skirbekk 2015: Chapter 1).<sup>6</sup> Having a taxonomy of survey responses, as discussed above (“atheist”, “agnostic”, “nothing in particular”, etc.), is not the same as having a taxonomy of religions. That is, what respondents indicate on surveys is not always directly comparable to actual religions or life stances, like atheism and agnosticism, and trying to match responses to religions without any nuance is rife with problems. The *WRD* does not have “unaffiliated” or “nothing in particular” categories and therefore forces all survey responses into one of the 18 categories. The *WRD* attempts to identify the total number of religionists in each of the categories and identifies atheists based on survey and census responses (where available). After a thorough investigation of atheists and the 16 categories of religionists (17 categories total), all remaining individuals are considered agnostics.

While this might appear to be a less robust method, the *WRD* employs it because censuses and surveys rarely include “agnostic” as a choice from a set list. In addition, researchers behind the *WRD* find that most people initially identifying as “nothing in particular” can be placed into religion categories based on their responses to other questions regarding religious rituals, practices, and beliefs, as seen above. “Nothing in particular” is only a very loose statement of self-identification and does not fit into a standard religious or non-religious category. Simply put, different researchers have different ideas of what “nothing in particular” actually means, which greatly impacts the number of non-religious reported in a particular country, and thus globally.

While the United States and many European countries have long histories of engaging in this kind of research, many – often more underdeveloped – countries can be difficult for Western researchers to access, and/or speak languages that are difficult for Western researchers to learn. The resulting lack of available survey and polling data from non-Western countries presents problems for social science research.<sup>7</sup> The *WRD*'s method directly addresses this challenge through an additional taxonomy in which the world's ethnic

6 The 18 categories are, in order of size (2015): Christians, Muslims, Hindus, agnostics, Buddhists, Chinese folk-religionists, ethnoreligionists, atheists, New religionists, Sikhs, Jews, Spiritists, Daoists, Confucianists, Baha'is, Jains, Shintoists, and Zoroastrians.

7 See, for example, Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010, which shows that survey respondents for human behavior studies are disproportionately from Western, Educated, Industrialized,



groups are paired with religion statistics. Each distinct ethno-linguistic group in a country is assigned varying shares of the 18 categories of religion. For example, the Japanese in Japan are reported as 56% Mahayana Buddhist, 23% New religionist (of various types), 10% agnostic, 3% atheist, 2% Shinto, and 1% Christian. Each group is traced throughout the world with the assumption that their religious breakdown will be the same abroad as it is in their home country.<sup>8</sup> This method allows researchers to find atheist and agnostic people in non-Western countries. For example, the *WRD* reports that Somalia – a majority-Muslim country – is also home to around 3,000 agnostics and 2,000 atheists. These groups are represented largely through the presence of Italians (15% agnostic, 2% atheist), French (19% agnostic, 5% atheist), Americans (12% agnostic, 1% atheist), and Britons (14% agnostic, 2% atheist).

### Case Study: New Zealand

In New Zealand, tracking so-called “secularizing” trends has become increasingly popular for sociologists, demographers, and others. Like many other Western countries, New Zealand has a historically strong Christian (here, Anglican) culture and background, but in the twenty-first century has experienced a decline in Christian affiliation.

New Zealand does ask a religious affiliation question on its census, serving as the primary source of religious and non-religious demographics (see figure 5). In 2006, 55.6% of respondents claimed they were Christian, while 34.6% checked “no religion” (Statistics New Zealand 2014). The measure is a one-step question, “What is your religion?”, with “no religion” as the first option. There is no option for self-identifying as atheist or agnostic on the census except for writing it in.

The category “no religion” presumably includes atheists and agnostics, but arriving at separate figures requires triangulation with other data sources and estimation by researchers. A similar problem exists for the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) religion survey, which was conducted in New Zealand

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Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies and are therefore the least representative of human society.

8 This assumption suffers from an obvious limitation, especially with respect to religiously persecuted people. For example, members of many of the people groups who have left the Middle East (majority-Muslim countries) are more likely to be Christian than is the group as a whole. Iraqis in Iraq, to cite just one, are 98% Muslim (<1% Christian), whereas in the United States, to which many refugees have fled, Iraqis are only 82% Muslim (and 16% Christian; Johnson and Zurlo 2015).

18 What is your religion?

no religion

Christian

Buddhist

Hindu

Muslim

Jewish

other religion.  
Print what it is:

Which of these, if any, are you?

Anglican

Catholic

Presbyterian

Methodist

Ratana

Ringatū

other. Print what it is:

or

object to answering this question

FIGURE 5  
New Zealand 2006 religion census question  
Source: Statistics New Zealand

in 1991, 1998, and 2008 (ISSP Research Group 2011).<sup>9</sup> In New Zealand the ISSP asks, “What is your current religion or religious denomination?”, followed by an alphabetical list of 23 choices that combines religions (Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, etc.) with Christian denominations (Assemblies of God, Catholic, Mormon, Ratana, etc.), and then “No religion” as the last option. Despite a plethora of choices, neither atheist nor agnostic is an option. Other questions, however, might be used to indicate that a respondent is atheist or agnostic. Respondents rate themselves on a 7-point scale of religiosity, ranging from “extremely religious” to “extremely non-religious” (plus “can’t choose”). The response “extremely nonreligious” could be an indication of atheist self-identification, although it is not as clear-cut a measure as not believing in God.<sup>10</sup> Another question reported that 13% of respondents in New Zealand claimed they did not believe in God (up from 8% in 1998). Another 15% claimed, “I don’t know whether there is a God and I don’t believe there is any way to find out” (up from 12% in 1998), which could be interpreted as an agnostic response. Based on these two responses, this measure would seem to indicate that New Zealand is 28% non-religious (Keysar and Navarro-Rivera 2013: 555–562) – or nearly

9 Question wording was different between 1991 and 1998, making it difficult to study change over time.

10 Sometimes atheists say on surveys that they believe in God (See Funk and Smith 2012: 9).

14 percentage points below the 41.9% who self-identified as having no religion on the census. However, as with the census, using ISSP data does not permit separation of atheists and agnostics into two distinct populations, especially in light of the lack of correlation with a self-identification question. In addition, many who responded “no religion” might actually hold spiritual or religious values or engage in religious practices, even though they might not be members of formal religious institutions.

An important issue is at play here: identifying the non-religious by belief versus by self-identification. In the World Values Survey Wave 6, 29.4% of respondents globally indicated disbelief in God, but only 8.5% identified as atheist (see Keysar 2015: 142). For New Zealand, 7.7% of respondents self-identified as atheist (self-identification) and 40.9% as “not a religious person” – an estimated 48.6% non-religious – with an additional 2.0% giving no answer and 6.7% saying “don’t know”, again very different results from the census and ISSP. Especially confusing about this question is the distinction it makes between “atheist” and “not a religious person” – by definition atheists are also not religious people, but respondents can choose only one of the two options. In addition, where the WVS asks for what it calls “religious denomination” (self-identification), only 32.4% of respondents chose “none”. Essentially, in the same survey, 48.6% of respondents said they were not religious on one measure, while on a separate measure 32.4% said they had no religion. Looking at other measures (measuring by belief/non-belief), only 23.8% indicated they did not believe in God (potential atheists), with another 15.8% saying they didn’t know (potential agnostics) – similar to the “not religious” measure (but not to the “no religion” measure). It is also probable that the “no religion” response includes religious people (likely Christians), considering that 57.2% of respondents indicated that they *do* believe in God.

The Pew Research Center estimates that in 2010 New Zealand was 57.0% Christian and 36.6% unaffiliated. By 2050, they anticipate the unaffiliated will overtake Christians to become the country’s largest group at 45.1%, with Christians dropping to 44.7% (Hackett, Connor, Stonawski, Skirbekk 2015: 240). New Zealand is one of three countries, along with France and the Netherlands, that Pew anticipate will have majority unaffiliated populations by 2050 (Hackett, Connor, Stonawski, Skirbekk 2015: 240). Their 2010 religious estimates on which 2050 projections are based are derived from 2006 census data, adjusted to account for religious groups and migrant populations that are typically underrepresented. In New Zealand, Pew uses the term “unaffiliated” to indicate the “no religion” response on the census, whereas in other settings (such as the United States, where there is no religion question on the census), “unaffiliated” is used to mean survey responses for atheist, agnostic, and nothing

in particular. The unaffiliated category thus apparently differs from context to context, making amassing global totals based on Pew's methodological perspective difficult.

The *World Religion Database* takes into consideration all of these sources, along with others, to arrive at its best estimate for atheists and agnostics in New Zealand. The first step is ascertaining affiliation with each of the major religious groups. The census is the first source of religion data; in 2006 it reported that New Zealand was 55.6% Christian. The *World Religion Database* has New Zealand as 60.2% Christian, raising the total by around 5 percentage points after taking into consideration data from religious communities themselves. The largest Christian denominations in New Zealand (2010) are the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand, and Polynesia (630,000); the Catholic Church in Aotearoa New Zealand (528,000); the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand (430,000); and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons; 104,000). Each of these churches produces statistics of adherents on an annual basis that are taken into consideration alongside the total number of Christians reported in the census.

Atheist numbers as estimated by the *WRD* are rather small, only 1% of the New Zealand population. Survey results from virtually every country show that relatively low percentages of the population select "atheist" as their religious identity. This can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that in many countries "atheist" is perceived to be much more extreme, and even antagonistic, than the more general "not religious" (Keysar 2015: 136).

After membership in all other religious groups (Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Jews, Baha'i, Buddhists, Chinese folk-religionists) has been enumerated, the remainder of the country's population is coded "agnostic". The *WRD* reports New Zealand as 31% agnostic, similar to the findings of many survey measures detailed above. Considering agnostics and atheists together, the *WRD* reports New Zealand as 32.4% non-religious, only four percentage points lower than Pew's estimate for the unaffiliated of 36.6%.

### The Unaffiliated as Folk-Religionists and Animists

Difficulties interpreting the "none" responses on surveys is not limited to the Western world. In Asia and Africa, people who answer "none" on religion questions are very often folk-religionists, shamanists, Buddhists, Shintoists, animists, and/or followers of other "indigenous" or traditional religions. Usually they understand the question to mean, "Do you belong to one of the organized world religions?" – meaning Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and so on.

*South Korea.* The Pew Forum reports that in 2010, 46% of South Koreans were unaffiliated (sourced in the 2005 census). A closer examination of Korean society, however, reveals that most Koreans practice a wide variety of religious customs (Kim 2002). The census and surveys ask questions that Koreans understand to mean, “What religious tradition do you have faith in?” This means that those who answer “none” might be deeply religious people who do not see themselves as part of an organized religious sect (Kim 2002: 305 note 4). One survey, for example, showed that 77% of Koreans had been to see a fortune-teller at least once in their lives (*Joongangilbo* 1998). Koreans who match the definition of atheists and agnostics used in Western countries are only a small fraction of the population perhaps 1.6% combined (Johnson and Grim 2015). In fact, a large number of those who say they have “no” religion practice shamanism, while smaller percentages are New religionists or Buddhists. Andrew Kim argues that the success of Protestantism in South Korea is directly related to how it did not require the repudiation of religious beliefs (i.e. Shamanism, and to a lesser extent Buddhism and Confucianism) but represented an extension or continuation of Korean religious tradition (Kim 2000).

*Japan.* The Pew Forum reports that in 2010, 57% of Japanese were unaffiliated (sourced as 2007 Asian Barometer, adjusted to account for undercounted religious groups). Other measures have also found Japan to be highly non-religious. The ISSP 2008, for example, reported 9% atheist and 19% agnostic. Yet even a cursory glance at Japanese society shows that many Japanese practice many religious customs on a daily basis. Religion scholar Robert Ellwood maintains that the gap between self-identification and practice relates to the Japanese understanding of the word “religion”, literally “the teaching of a sect”, for example, a particular school in Buddhism. Large numbers of Japanese did not identify with any sect in the survey and thus had “no religion”. But Ellwood was more inclined to look for “religious phenomena” such as sacred spaces, sacred times, rituals, and pilgrimages – and he saw them everywhere, concluding that it is misleading to call the Japanese majority agnostics and atheists (Ellwood 2008: 19).

*Botswana.* When asked, followers of tribal religions in Africa often say that they have “no religion” because they are thinking in terms of “world religions”. The Pew Forum reports that in 2010, 20.6% of the population was unaffiliated (derived from the 2001 census). Scholars from Botswana analyzing the census found that ancestral worship and practices are central for those who follow traditional beliefs, whereas the census question focuses on membership in a particular church, community, or confession (Kgosimore, Sebolai, Macheng, Mabote 2014). The researchers imply that traditional religionists are likely to check the “no religion” box because they are not members of institutional religious communities. Yet, African traditional religion is pervasive in the

society of Botswana (Amanze 2002). Consequently, putting tribal religionists who carry on the pre-Christian religions (African traditional religions) of their forefathers in the same category with atheists and agnostics (less than 1% of Botswana's population by the measures used in the *World Religion Database*) makes little sense (see Simpson 1995).

These issues are found in many other countries, but particularly in countries where people practice forms of folk religion or animism, such as Vietnam and China. Another potential problem area is questions related to belief in God. In the World Values Survey, 67% of Thais said that they did not believe in God (World Values Survey 2000–2014). It might be easy to conclude from this that two-thirds of the Thai population are non-religious. However, only 1.0% said they were atheists. The 2001 census reveals that 94% of the people in Thailand self-identify as Buddhist. This seeming contradiction – majority who do not believe in God and yet are Buddhists – makes sense when one remembers that Buddhism does not traditionally include the worship of a god or gods.

### Non-religionists, Atheists, and Agnostics Worldwide

Table 2 enumerates *WRD* figures for religionists and non-religionists (atheists and agnostics) in 1970, 2010, and 2050 by continent and globally. These are then related to the Pew Research Center's estimates of the unaffiliated in 2010 and 2050 (Hackett, Connor, Stonawski, and Skirbekk 2015). The result shows a gap between the population shares of the unaffiliated and the non-religionists; the gap is labeled here as representing the “unaffiliated religious”. These are religious people who for a variety of reasons say they have “no” religion and thus are considered “unaffiliated”. This gap ranges in size from 0.7 percentage points (Oceania, 2010) to 6.6 percentage points (Asia, 2050). On a relative basis, the unaffiliated religious are expected to grow from 28% of the global unaffiliated

TABLE 2 *Religionists, non-religionists, and the unaffiliated religious by continent and globe in 1970, 2010, and 2050*

Continent	Religion	Pop. 1970	% 1970	Pop. 2010	% 2010	Pop. 2050	% 2050
Africa	Religionists	365,784,000	99.8%	1,023,872,000	99.3%	2,377,012,000	99.3%
	Unaffil. religious			20,481,000	2.0%	40,979,000	1.7%
	Non-religionists	691,000	0.2%	7,212,000	0.7%	16,163,000	0.7%
	Atheists	103,000	0.0%	587,000	0.1%	1,259,000	0.1%
	Agnostics	588,000	0.2%	6,625,000	0.6%	14,904,000	0.6%

TABLE 2 *Religionists, non-religionists, and the unaffiliated religious by continent (cont.)*

Continent	Religion	Pop. 1970	% 1970	Pop. 2010	% 2010	Pop. 2050	% 2050
Asia	Religionists	1,580,694,000	74.3%	3,539,482,000	85.0%	4,634,959,000	89.8%
	Unaffil. religious			237,210,000	5.7%	338,986,000	6.6%
	Non-religionists	547,936,000	25.7%	625,958,000	15.0%	529,103,000	10.2%
	Atheists	109,458,000	5.1%	116,068,000	2.8%	98,999,000	1.9%
	Agnostics	438,479,000	20.6%	509,890,000	12.2%	430,104,000	8.3%
Europe	Religionists	517,213,000	78.7%	631,698,000	85.3%	584,326,000	82.4%
	Unaffil. religious			31,734,000	4.3%	43,717,000	6.2%
	Non-religionists	140,156,000	21.3%	108,610,000	14.7%	124,741,000	17.6%
	Atheists	53,815,000	8.2%	15,596,000	2.1%	17,091,000	2.4%
Latin America	Religionists	280,283,000	97.5%	574,197,000	96.3%	737,889,000	94.4%
	Unaffil. religious			23,628,000	4.0%	24,042,000	3.1%
	Non-religionists	7,305,000	2.5%	21,995,000	3.7%	43,678,000	5.6%
	Atheists	1,265,000	0.4%	2,917,000	0.5%	4,159,000	0.5%
Northern America	Religionists	220,230,000	95.2%	294,796,000	85.1%	360,287,000	80.7%
	Unaffil. religious			7,668,000	2.2%	28,187,000	6.3%
	Non-religionists	11,199,000	4.8%	51,705,000	14.9%	85,914,000	19.3%
	Atheists	300,000	0.1%	2,168,000	0.6%	3,151,000	0.7%
Oceania	Religionists	18,807,000	95.6%	29,866,000	81.5%	43,896,000	77.2%
	Unaffil. religious			268,000	0.7%	3,339,000	5.9%
	Non-religionists	873,000	4.4%	6,793,000	18.5%	12,978,000	22.8%
	Atheists	215,000	1.1%	479,000	1.3%	1,065,000	1.9%
Globe	Religionists	2,983,012,000	80.8%	6,093,911,000	88.1%	8,738,368,000	91.5%
	Unaffil. religious			320,990,000	4.6%	479,250,000	5.0%
	Non-religionists	708,161,000	19.2%	822,272,000	11.9%	812,576,000	8.5%
	Atheists	165,156,000	4.5%	137,815,000	2.0%	125,723,000	1.3%
	Agnostics	543,004,000	14.7%	684,457,000	9.9%	686,853,000	7.2%

Source: Religionists and non-religionists: Johnson and Grim 2015; Unaffiliated: Hackett, Conrad, Stonawski, and Skirbekk 2015.

population in 2010 to 37% in 2050. The effect is most extreme for Africa, where the unaffiliated religious represent more than 70% of all unaffiliated persons in both years.

The global results for 2010 show that of the world's 6.9 billion people, 88.1% are religionists and 11.9% are agnostics or atheists. Within the 88.1% are 4.6% of the global population (321 million people) who are "unaffiliated religious" – those of various religions who check the "none" box on a census or survey. As mentioned previously, another way of expressing this is to say that 28% of the unaffiliated are, in reality, likely religionists. Consequently, the concept has been operationalized in the *WRD* so that many of the unaffiliated are coded not as atheists or agnostics but instead as folk religionists, tribal religionists, or members of one of the major world religions.

The major religion of the unaffiliated religious varies by continent. In Africa, the unaffiliated religious are mainly tribal religionists. In Asia, where the single largest population of unaffiliated religious (237 million in 2010) resides, they are largely folk-religionists and shamanists, as well as Buddhists, Shintoists, and tribal religionists. In Europe, Latin America, Northern America, and Oceania, they are predominantly Christians.

Both the *World Religion Database* and the Pew Research Center expect the percentage of the population with no religious affiliation (the "non-religious" and the "unaffiliated", respectively) to decline into the future. Going back to 1970, nearly 20% of the global population was non-religionists (Pew has no data from 1970). This can be attributed largely to the fact that the Communist era was then at its height, with both the Soviet Union and China encouraging atheism in their large populations. Conversely, the world is now becoming more religious over time, rising from 80.8% religious in 1970 to 88.1% in 2010, and projected to increase to 91.5% in 2050.

## Conclusion

This chapter began with the question "Who are the unaffiliated?" A simple answer is, "people who check the 'no religion' box on a census or survey form". These are then described by many researchers as "non-religious", "nones", and related terms. A more careful examination of censuses, surveys, and statistics from religious communities shows that this is not a complete or correct assessment of their religious commitments. Instead, religious people would seem to have a number of reasons for not identifying themselves as adherents of any religion. These reasons vary by region. In the Western world, many Christians use this to distance themselves from institutional Christianity. In



Asia, folk religionists understand the question to refer to organized religious communities. In Africa, tribal religionists do the same. At the same time, while atheists sometimes have an opportunity to express their lack of affiliation on a form, they are often conflated with agnostics and other who answer “none”.

The method presented in this chapter for identifying the non-religious in a population involves determining the religious affiliation of everyone (including atheists) except the agnostics, and then assuming that the remainder of the population are agnostics. A major part of this method is estimating how many religious people are actually found within reported unaffiliated populations, like Christians who retain their faith but who are not attached to churches. Until more nuanced language is employed in censuses and surveys – and there is more nuanced reporting from demographers and social scientists – this might be the only way to arrive at an estimate that is more true to what is happening on the ground concerning people’s everyday, lived experiences of religion.

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