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Why are Americans walking away from religion?

Tom Roberts | Oct. 9, 2012
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While the data that show people in the United States are walking away from organized religion in unprecedented numbers are overwhelmingly clear, they don't answer the more nagging question: Why?

Included in the study [1] by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, called " 'Nones' on the rise," are four theories advanced by those who study societal trends. And perhaps it is no surprise in this political year that the one that seems most probable (none is provable by the data) has to do with religion and politics.

One theory holds that the increase in "nones" is reflective of other social trends, "including the postponement of marriage and parenthood by growing numbers of young adults."

The study's authors, however, note that while polls show that among adults under 30, "married people are more likely to have a religious affiliation than are unmarried people," other data demonstrate that Americans do not become more affiliated with religious organizations as they marry and age; in fact, they say, "the percentage of people in each generation who are religiously affiliated has remained stable, or decreased slightly, as that generation has aged."

How about the "bowling alone" syndrome, which defines the reality that increasingly Americans are living more separate lives and disengaging from all forms of communal activities, such as service clubs and other community groups? Is it merely extending to churches? The researchers say that could be the case, since those who are religiously active are more likely, according to surveys, to be engaged in community activities and groups. The theory also seems to square with the "nones" study that finds "religiously unaffiliated Americans are less inclined than Americans as a whole to feel that it is very important to belong to 'a community of people who share your values and beliefs.'"

Another theory blames the growth of secularization and its links to wealth as a reason for disengagement from religion. Again, the data provide some justification. According to the Pew report, past surveys in other countries show "an association between these measures of religiosity and a country's national wealth." Countries with a high gross domestic product tended to be less religious than countries with a low GDP. But the United States, with both a high GDP and high levels of religious commitment, was always the exception to the rule. Until now. Some suggest that the rise of the "nones" is a sign of advancing secularization.

The theory that appears to have the most support from the recent data is the one called "Political backlash."

"Several leading scholars contend that young adults, in particular, have turned away from organized religion because they perceive it as deeply entangled with conservative politics and do not want to have any association with it," according to the report.

The researchers cite several studies and quote from a recent book *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, by Robert Putnam and David Campbell, who argue that in recent decades "[r]eligiosity and

conservative politics became increasingly aligned, and abortion and gay rights became emblematic of the emergent culture wars." Consequently, say Putnam and Campbell, many young Americans came to view religion as "judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical, and too political."

Indeed, the current survey figures bear out some of that thesis. And the Democrats' "God problem" of recent years may be turning into a political and demographic advantage. According to the most recent Pew report, the unaffiliated are "concentrated among younger adults, political liberals and people who take liberal positions on same-sex marriage."

Two thirds of unaffiliated say churches and other religious institutions "are too concerned with money and power (70 percent) and too involved in politics (67 percent)." The unaffiliated also are less likely than the affiliated to be concerned with a president's religious beliefs. While the unaffiliated have increased in both parties, the increase is greater among Democrats.

More: Study: Almost one in five Americans has no religious affiliation [2]

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