

# How do we get the 'nones' back in the habit?

As those claiming no religious affiliation increase, apologetics requires patience and humility, says theologian.

BY PAULA DOYLE  
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The "nones" are rising — "nones," in this case, meaning people who indicate in surveys that they have no religion or do not belong to any denomination.

According to a Pew Research Center study released last week, the U.S. population now has its highest-ever percentage of religiously unaffiliated people. Nearly 20 percent of all U.S. adults — one in five — are religiously unaffiliated. This number is even higher among young adults: 32 percent of those under the age of 30 — one in three — say they are religiously unaffiliated.

Results of the nationwide survey conducted this summer indicate the steepest rise in those identifying themselves as religiously unaffiliated is concentrated in one group: whites. One-fifth of (non-Hispanic) whites now describe themselves as religiously unaffiliated, up five percentage points since a 2007 Pew Research Center survey. In contrast, the share of African Americans and Hispanics who are religiously unaffiliated has not changed significantly in recent years.

While the number of Americans who currently say religion is very important in their lives (58 percent) has changed little since 2007, the survey's findings reveal a gradual decline in religious commitment. Whereas 25 percent of U.S. adults surveyed in 2003 said they seldom or never attended religious

services, this year's survey showed that number had risen 4 points, to 29 percent.

The Pew survey also showed that America's Protestant share of the population has dipped significantly below 50 percent, with fewer than half of U.S. adults (48 percent) saying they are Protestant. The current number of U.S. Catholics, which now stands at 22 percent, has been steady for a few years, due to immigration from Latin America.

These findings represent a perpetuation of long-term trends, revealed in The General Social Surveys (GSS) conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago over four decades. The Pew study notes that the percentage of religiously unaffiliated respondents began to rise noticeably in the 1990s and stood at 18 percent in the 2010 GSS.

Not only are young adults less likely to be affiliated than their elders, the Pew study points out, the GSS shows that the percentage of Americans who were raised without an affiliation has been rising gradually, from about 3 percent in the early 1970s to about 8 percent in the past decade.

Interestingly, however, the majority of the "nones" indicate that they were brought up in a religious tradition. The latest Pew Research Center/Religion & Ethics News-Weekly survey finds that approximately three-quarters of unaffiliated adults were raised with some affiliation (74 percent).

## 'New Apologetics'

To those who attended a 2012 Religious Education Congress workshop in Anaheim on "New Apologetics and the Defense of God," the survey was no surprise. Dr. Greer Gordon, theologian and former professor at Regis College in Massachusetts, addressed the growing rise in the religiously unaffiliated and the challenges this poses for evangelization.

"We are a religiously diverse nation and we have an awful lot of people who do not know God in any way shape, fashion or form," said Gordon, former diocesan director of evangelization in Baton Rouge. Bringing people to an awareness of God and Christ, she said, requires patience and humility, as converts to Christianity may not be called to the Catholic faith.

"To really engage in the process of apologetics, we have to really be people who pray," she said. "Our egos cannot be in it — this is the



PAULA DOYLE

**CONGRESS SPEAKER** — Theologian Dr. Greer Gordon (right), who spoke at the 2012 Los Angeles Religious Education Congress in Anaheim last March, says bringing people to God takes a personal time investment.

work of God. This is not our work."

She dispelled the notion that apologetics is appropriate for non-Catholic Christians, even with members of "that strain of radical reformed Protestantism that thinks we are still in the 16th and 17th centuries and it's time to go to war with the heretical Catholics." Noting that Protestants are "already Christian," Gordon declared that the proper candidates for apologetics are people who do not believe in God.

Apologetics is perhaps more difficult today, she noted, because, as the Pew study

found, moved people outside the court of thinking in terms of the One, True God," said Gordon. "People are not going to church — not because they don't want to go to church, but because it doesn't occur to them that they ought to want to go to church.

"[Many] people are not engaging in anything meaningful in their lives," she continued. "They move deeper and deeper into drugs and alcohol because no one has offered them something more in their lives — these are the people our apologetics should be directed to."

She identified three distinct sub-groups of candidates for apologetics:

—Unbelievers who are well-educated and come with a history and an academic background for argumentation. According to Gordon, some are life-long students who see it as their life's objective to deconstruct others in their faith traditions.

—Those with some knowledge of God who have not really made a decision for or against God in their lives.

—People who have no religious background, including many students in Catholic colleges and universities.

"When we do away with theology requirements in our Catholic colleges, we lose the opportunity to engage [students] and bring them to God," said Gordon. "We also lose the opportunity to continue to engage those who are already baptized believers and bring them more deeply to God."

She added that bringing people to God takes a personal time investment. "You're not going to get it all done in one conversation. It may mean really making for a long-

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findings confirm, more children are being raised without much, or any, religious education. Among those children raised with religion, many join different denominations than they were raised in or reject religion altogether as adults.

"All these things that have transpired have

### Religious Affiliation

Majorities of the 20 percent of Americans who are not religiously affiliated believe in God and think of themselves as religious or spiritual.

	U.S. GENERAL PUBLIC	UNAFFILIATED	AFFILIATED
<i>How important is religion in your life?</i>	%	%	%
very/somewhat	80	33	91
not too/not at all	18	65	8
<i>Do you believe in God or universal spirit?</i>			
yes, certain	69	30	77
yes, less certain	23	38	20
no	7	27	2
<i>Frequency of prayer</i>			
daily	58	21	66
weekly/monthly	21	20	22
seldom/never	19	58	11
<i>Think of self as...</i>			
religious	65	18	75
spiritual, not religious	18	37	15
not spiritual or religious	15	42	8

Source: Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life ©2012 CNS