

Nevers, Nones, and Nots: *Latent Life in Unexpected Places*

A Research Note

by

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ABSTRACT

The three primary objective measures of personal religiosity that have emerged over time — attendance, identification, and orientation — have also produced three variations of “non-religious” people: Nevers, Nones, and Nots. In this paper, the author uses Canadian national survey data to examine the prevalence of each of these expressions of non-religiousness and their relationship to each other, as well as explore beliefs and attitudes that are associated with each of the designations. He finds that there has been little change in non-attendance, non-identification, and disbelief over time. Further, the labels have tended to lead to overly simplistic and misleading conclusions about the secularization of individuals. Contrary to widespread claims and perception, the findings point to widespread openness to religion, not only in the population as a whole but also among Nevers, Nones, and Nots.

Introduction

In recent years, considerable attention has been drawn to atheism and the renunciation of religion. Books like Richard Dawkins', *The God Delusion* (2006), *God is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchens (2007), and *Letter to a Christian Nation* by Sam Harris (2006) have been international best sellers accompanied by enormous media attention. Some observers have speculated that the interest in such books reflects the growth of atheism. Others have suggested the books are striking a nerve with a growing number of people who are troubled about the role religion is playing in world tensions, and have become increasingly disenchanted with organized religion (see, for example, Bethune 2007).

Added to the more general thesis of secularization, these kinds of developments underline the need in the study of religion for measures that look at dimensions of religious disenchantment, such as disbelief, lack of group involvement, and self-image. They might include readings on the prevalence of atheism, service attendance, and identification with a religion.

The effort to measure religious disenchantment would seem to be the flipside of tapping religious commitment. Many of the early research efforts to tap "personal religiosity" used group involvement indicators, notably identification and attendance. Classic work by people like Will Herberg (1955) and Gerhard Lenski (1961) examined the correlates of people identifying themselves as "Protestant," "Catholic," and "Jew," while many other researchers emphasized the need to differentiate between participation levels by using variables such as membership and attendance. With the work in particular of Charles Glock and Rodney Stark (1965, 1968) came the well-known call to recognize the multidimensional nature of religion by taking into consideration other components of commitment as reflected in belief, practice, experience, and knowledge. Subsequent work probing religious commitment — its nature, sources, and consequences — has tended to emphasize identification, participation, and orientation, with the latter taking diverse theological (e.g., orthodox-liberal beliefs) and psychological (e.g., intrinsic-extrinsic) forms. Simply put, the three primary operational definitions of religious commitment have come to be religious group preference, attendance, and orientation.

Of considerable importance, these three dominant efforts to define and refine religiosity have resulted not only in an improved ability to locate people who are religious but also to uncover people who are not particularly religious. To use a politically incorrect metaphor, the measures have uncovered the goats as well as the sheep, the uncommitted as well as the committed.

Unfortunately, although these commitment measures clearly tap different aspects of devotion — namely group identification, group involvement, and belief and disposition respectively — people who score low on the various religiosity measures are commonly lumped together and given the blanket label of “non-religious.” The literature on “dimensions of marginal commitment” is scarce. Many observers, academic and otherwise, people assume that an individual who doesn’t identify doesn’t attend and doesn’t believe. Terms like “unchurched,” “nones,” and “non-believers” are frequently used almost interchangeably.

In view of such assumptions and subsequent confusion, careful examinations need to be carried out to clarify what kinds of people our measures of identification, attendance, and orientation measures are turning up, not only on “the high end” of those measures but on “the low end” as well. Far from being just an academic exercise, our findings from such explorations are of central importance to the question of how thorough and ongoing secularization actually is. If it is true that secularization is largely a myth — that Rodney Stark and his associates (Stark and Bainbridge 1995; Finke and Stark 1992; Stark and Finke 2000) are right in maintaining that secularization is actually stimulating religious group innovation, that anticipated innovation should be showing up in religious vitality at the individual level, particularly among people who we thought were “non-religious.” Readings on the prevalence of disenchantment with religion also are necessary to address questions such as the prevalence of atheism, and its relationship to other facets of religion, including group participation and identification.

This research note offers some preliminary data and thoughts that are intended to lead us toward improved clarity concerning religious disenchantment.

The Three Primary Categories of Disenchantment

Nevers

There probably is no single indicator that pollsters and researchers use more to track the health of organized religion than weekly *service attendance*. In the course of looking for the weeklys, we obviously uncover people who say they “never” attend religious services and often, like virtually everyone else, assume that these “*Nevers*” are not religious in any conventional sense.

Yet, a modest amount of reflection would lead us to realize that the seemingly prosaic deduction that they are not interested in organized religion is precarious. Clearly some people who never attend services stay away because of health, mobility, and access problems. Apathy and disenchantment might also be involved. All we know for sure is that they never show up. We don’t know why. What we do know is that there is no reason to assume that, just because someone “never” attends services, he or she has ceased to identify with a religious tradition. Moreover, there certainly is no reason to assume such a person has abandoned his or her religious beliefs.

Nones

When we make use of *self-identification* to measure one’s association with a religious tradition, invariably there are some respondents who say they don’t identify with any religion. In the pioneering article on the subject, Glenn Vernon (1968) dubbed such people “The Religious Nones.”

Here again, most observers assume that the Nones have something of a permanent distaste for religion, preferring to live lives, which — in the words of one articulate teenager I spoke to a few years back — are “religion free.” Yet our examinations over the years of “*Nones*” in Canada have suggested we need to be very careful in assuming too much about the “non-religious” nature of people in this category. One of our dominant findings has been that the “no religion” self-designation is often fairly temporary. Nones are disproportionately young and, as they marry and have children, large numbers turn to the religious groups of their parents and grandparents for “rites of passage.” In the process, many “re-acquire” the Catholic and Protestant identities of their parents. In addition, marriages involving Nones and others tend to result in children more frequently than not being raised “something”

rather than “nothing.” In short, people who take up residence in the “Religious None” category often have relatively short stays (Bibby 2002:64-65).

Since many of the Nones have religious backgrounds complete with religious relatives and religious memories, they would not necessarily be expected to be Nevers. On the contrary, we would expect that many Nones would attend services at least occasionally, in many instances accompanying their parents, other relatives, and friends. There is also little reason to assume that people who say they “no religion” necessarily have abandoned religious beliefs.

Figure 1. Winners and Losers by Religiosity Measure		
Measure	High	Low
Attendance	Weeklys	Nevers
Identification	Somethings	Nones
Orientation (Belief in God)	Theists	Nots

Notes

A third measure of religiosity that has been popular in North American culture has been the probing of beliefs and belief orientation — sometimes by simply asking individuals whether or not they believe in God and proceeding to divide people into the polar opposite camps of theists and atheists. It is widely taken for granted that people in the latter category who don’t believe in God are neither involved in churches nor inclined to identify with religious traditions. These “Nots” — to coin a convenient shorthand term — are often viewed as particularly non-religious, in that they are assumed by many people to “score low” on all three religiosity measures. Opinion polls in the U.S. and Canada suggest that Americans differ from Canadians in continuing to have a measure of hostility toward atheists that readily exceeds the level of negative sentiments toward Nones and Nevers.¹ However, a little reflection reminds us that atheists don’t just live in foxholes. They sometimes are found in religious groups and often have religious group heritages that are just a parent or grandparent away. In short, “Nots” are not necessarily either “Nevers” or “Nones.”

Beyond such background generalizations, what we need to do is to put a little data on the subject.

Some Empirical Peeks at People in the Three Categories

Since 1975 I have been monitoring social trends in Canada through a series of adult national surveys by mail every five years through 2005. Each of the surveys has involved a highly representative sample of approximately 1,500 people, making it possible to generalize to the Canadian population with a high level of accuracy (about 3.5 percentage points either way, 19 times in 20). Together, these seven “*Project Canada*” surveys provide comprehensive data on Canadian life spanning the last quarter of the twentieth century.² Religion has been a primary focus of the research program (for methodological details, see Bibby, 2002:249ff; 2006:225-226).

The most recent *Project Canada 2000* and *Project Canada 2005* data sets provide fairly comprehensive and current information on the incidence and nature of Nevers, Nones, and Nots. In addition, the wide-ranging survey items make it possible to explore some illustrative correlates of each of these three categories. While obviously specific to Canada the findings may well be applicable to the United States, as well as many settings elsewhere.

The Prevalence of Nevers, Nones, and Nots

The 2005 survey has found that Nevers make up 23% of the Canadian population, Nones 15%, and Nots just 7%. In the first two instances, the figures are up somewhat from previous levels. However, there has been little change since the mid-1980s in the proportion of people who claim to be atheists.

Table 1. Prevalence of Nevers, Nones, and Nots: 1975-2005

	1975	1985	1995	2005
Nevers	18%	18	17	23
Nones	9	9	13	15
Nots	6	6	9	7

As anticipated, these categories are not made up of mutually exclusive groups of people; conversely, the categories hardly involve perfect overlaps. A quick background check that reads something like Abbott and Costello’s “*Who’s on First*” — except that it’s even more confusing — shows that:

- almost half the *Nevers* are also *Nones*, but only about 20% are *Nots*;
- some 70% of the *Nones* are *Nevers*, but only 30% or so are *Nots*;
- 70% of the *Nots* are *Nevers*, and about 65% are *Nones*.

Put more clearly and succinctly, about one-half of the Nevers are also Nones, while Nones tend to Nevers, and Nots tend to be Nevers and Nones. Translated further, taken as a whole, *people who never attend services* usually are theists, and more than half identify with religious traditions. Individuals who *do not identify* with any religious tradition tend to be theists but about 70% do not attend religious services. And about 70% of *atheists* neither attend services nor identify with a religion.

Table 2. Overlapping of Nevers, Nones, and Nots: 2005

	N	% of Pop	Nevers	Nones	Nots
Nevers	361	23	---	47%	22
Nones	231	15	72	--	31
Nots	112	7	70	66	---

The correlation coefficients (r's): nevers-nones .49, nevers-nots .31, nones-nots .39

This means that, of the three statuses, being an atheist is the best predictor of being non-religious in the sense one neither attends services nor identifies with a religious tradition. Being a Never or being a None is not a good predictor of belief in God. But having no religion is a fairly good predictor of not attending services.

Of considerable importance, documentation of a measure of overlap between categories means that diminishing numbers of people fit into two or three categories. While 45% of Canadians are either Nevers (23), Nones (15%), or Nots (7%), only 4% of people across the country are Nevers *and* Nones *and* Nots. What this means is, to the extent that the three measures together tap “non-religiosity,” only about one in 25 people in the country are totally non-religious.

Table 3. Nevers, Nones, and Nots in National Perspective

Nevers only	11%
Nones only	3
Nots only	1
Nevers & Nones	7
Nevers & Nots	1
Nones & Nots	1
Nevers, Nones, & Nots	4
Rest of the Population	72
TOTAL	100

Social and Regional Characteristics

Nevers, Nones, and Nots do not comprise a majority of people in any social or demographic category. However, some variations do exist.

- *Nevers* and *Nones* are somewhat more likely to be younger, and considerably more apt to live in British Columbia than elsewhere. However, variations by gender and education are small in both cases.
- Few *atheists* are found in any category, but are marginally more common among males and in B.C.
- Canada's least religious people – those who are *Nevers and Nones and Nots* – are somewhat more common among BC residents (8%) than people living elsewhere.

Table 4. Social and Regional Variations Among Nevers, Nones, and Nots: 2005

		Nevers	Nones	Nots	ALL 3
NATIONALLY		23%	15	7	4
Age	18-34	24	22	8	4
	35-54	26	15	6	4
	55 & over	19	8	8	3
Gender	Male	25	15	10	5
	Female	21	14	4	2
Education	Degree Plus	20	18	6	4
	Some PS	26	14	8	3
	Less than HS	24	13	8	3
Region	British Columbia	38	34	11	8
	Alberta	27	18	8	5
	Ontario	21	12	7	3
	Quebec	21	14	8	3
	Atlantic	16	5	4	1
	Sask-Manitoba	13	8	4	2

Some Select Beliefs and Attitudes

The Project Canada 2000 survey followed an old lead of Peter Berger (1969) in exploring the extent to which “signals of transcendence” pointing to belief in "something beyond" are exhibited by Canadians. It seemed to be particularly interesting to see to what extent such "hints" are evident in the lives of those people who are not conventionally religious, and are presumably the toughest for both the churches and the gods to reach.

The findings suggest that such signals are readily evident in the lives of people in these three categories — frequently in the lives of *Nevers* and *Nones*, and sometimes in the lives of *Nots* as well. Further, all but the *Nots* exhibit interest in spirituality, and people in all three categories display surprisingly positive views toward organized religion.

- Large majorities in each category feel that no form of human *justice* provides an adequate response to some deplorable acts, and half of the *Nevers* and *Nones*, along with 30% of *Nots* maintain that “somehow, some day injustices will be made right.”
- Close to three in four *Nevers* and *Nones* express the belief that “*life has meaning beyond what we give to it,*” as do almost two in four *Nots*. *Belief in life after death* is held by about one-half of the *Nevers* and one-third of *Nones*, but by only about one in ten *Nots*.

- About 50% of Nevers and Nones but just 25% or so of Nots acknowledge they have *spiritual needs*. The spirituality they have in mind, however, is invariably non-conventional.
- Six in ten Nevers and five in ten Nones and Nots say religious groups still have a *role to play* in Canadian lives. Some 40% of Nevers and Nones say they are open to greater involvement in groups if they found it to be worthwhile; the figure is about 20% in the case of Nots.
- About one in three Nevers and one in five Nones indicate they believe in a *God or higher power who cares about them personally*, as do an enigmatic 4% of self-professed atheists.

	NAT	Nevers	Nones	Nots
Ultimate Justice				
In case of some deplorable acts, no human form of justice enough*	91%	90	86	85
Meaning & Life After Death				
Life has meaning beyond what we ourselves give to it*	86	72	71	45
I believe in life after death	67	46	35	13
Spirituality				
I myself have spiritual needs	72	51	47	27
Have a less conventional view of spirituality*	47	91	98	93**
Organized Religion				
Religious groups still have a role to play in Canadian lives*	75	62	50	46
Would consider being more involved if found worthwhile for your self/your family	63	41	37	19
God is Good				
I believe in a God or high power who cares about me personally	65	32	17	4

*2000; other items 2005. **N (15) too small for stable percentaging; 14 less conventional. Included for heuristic purposes.

Discussion and Conclusion

These findings suggest that for all the talk about increasing secularization in the post-1960s, during the past four decades or so there has been little increase in the proportions of average people who stopped attending services altogether, declared themselves to have no religion, and concluded the gods didn't exist. The percentages of Canadians who are found in each of those three categories in the early years of the new century are extremely small. What's more, as we have seen, a mere 2% of the populace are Nevers *and* Nones *and* Nots — translating into about 600,000 people in a country of some thirty million.

A closer look at the three “non-religious” categories shows that while they are not mutually exclusive, Nevers and Nones are disinclined to be Nots, that more than half of Nevers do not see themselves as Nones, and almost half the Nots who don't believe in God still show up occasionally at services. All but the Nots exhibit signals of transcendence and are interested in spirituality. A startling number indicate that they have not given up on organized religion.

Perhaps one of the key variables that has been overlooked in prematurely assuming that Nevers and Nones in particular have given up on religion is age. The dynamic nature of life means that life's "big" ultimate questions are going to be asked and critical life passages are going to be experienced. For many people, such issues and events appear to signal greater involvement, intensified belief, and increased commitment with the passage into adulthood and parenthood. That's why having "no religion" often is not particularly functional and often transitory.

The regional findings underscore the potential for religion to experience rejuvenation in the lives of significant numbers of people. No part of Canada has been more severely attacked for its apathy toward religion in recent years than Quebec. Yet the findings show that, contrary to popular belief, the lowest proportion of Nevers are found in Quebec. Additional survey results show that Quebeckers are not the least bit interested in switching to other groups; what's more, 55% of Catholic adults and 41% of Catholic teens in that province are receptive to greater involvement if the Roman Catholic Church can demonstrate that it is worth their while (Bibby 2002:44-50; Bibby 2007).

These findings suggest that non-religiousness in its varied forms — non-affiliation, non-attendance, and disbelief — has been overestimated. Even among people who have readily been assigned such labels, there appears to be considerable latent religious life.

This is hardly to say there are not people who have dropped out, who have no desire whatsoever to be part of a religious group, who have concluded there are no gods in the universe. However, these findings suggest such people constitute a small minority of the populace. Best-selling books by the likes of Dawkins and Hitchens notwithstanding, Canadians remain remarkably pro-God and pro-organized religion.

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NOTES

¹See, for example, National Opinion Research Center polls dating back to the early 1960s that probe American attitudes toward atheists.

²All five of the surveys have included samples of some 1,500 Canadian adults, selected from communities across the country using stratified and random sampling techniques. Response rates have averaged about 60%; cooperation levels that pollsters obtain in national surveys conducted by telephone or in person are typically around 65%. Discrepancies between sample and population characteristics have been corrected by weighting for provincial and community size, along with gender and age. With appropriate weighting — where the samples are reduced to about 1,200 cases (and in the 2005 survey, 1,600 cases) to minimize the use of large weight factors — the samples are highly representative of the Canadian population and are accurate within about 3 percentage points either way, 19 times in 20.