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THE CENSUS
IF YOU'RE NOT RELIGIOUS FOR GOD'S SAKE

Rise of the Non-Religious
Spreading Humanism the IHEU Way
that mainline faiths dwindled from 50 percent of the adult U.S. population to a mere 8 percent – lamented that “the Great Church of America has come to an end.” A researcher at the Ashbrook think-tank dubbed it “Flatline Protestantism.”

Catholic losses
Although Hispanic immigration resupplies U.S. Catholicism with replacements, many former adherents have drifted from the giant church. The 2008 American Religious Identification Survey found that 20 million Americans have quit Catholicism – thus one-tenth of U.S. adults now are ex-Catholics.

Sociologists are fascinated by America’s secular shift. Dr. Robert Putnam of Harvard, author of Bowling Alone, found as many as 40 percent of young Americans answering “none” to faith surveys. “It’s a huge change, a stunning development,” he said. “That is the future of America.” He joined Dr. David Campbell of Notre Dame in writing a new book, American Grace, that outlines the trend. Putnam’s Social Capital site sums up: “Young Americans are dropping out of religion at an alarming rate of five to six times the historic rate.”

Oddly, males outnumber females among the churchless. “The ratio of 60 males to 40 females is a remarkable result,” the 2008 ARIS poll reported. “These gender patterns correspond with many earlier findings that show women to be more religious than men.”

Growing secularism has political implications. The Republican Party may suffer as the white evangelical “religious right” shrinks. In contrast, burgeoning “nones” tend to vote Democratic. Sociologist Ruy Teixeira says the steady rise of the unaffiliated, plus swelling minorities, means that “by the 2016 election (or 2020 at the outside) the United States will have ceased to be a white Christian nation. Looking even farther down the road, white Christians will be only around 35 percent of the population by 2040, and conservative white Christians, who have been such a critical part of the Republican base, will be only about a third of that – a minority within a minority.”

Gradually, decade by decade, religion is moving from the advanced First World to the less-developed Third World. Faith retains enormous power in Muslim lands. Pentecostalism is booming in Africa and South America. Yet the West steadily turns more secular.

Civilization never stops evolving. We are living through another profound transition – but most of us are too busy to notice.

Counting Non-theists: Lies, Damn Lies and Religious Statistics around the World

Who’s interested in population counts and statistics on religion? Obviously religious people and religious organizations are. By way of contrast most Humanists, freethinkers and non-theistic organizations are not very interested in counting themselves.

Countries with state religious establishments tend to expend taxpayer funds to count people’s worldviews whereas most secular states do not.

So the countries where secularization has penetrated society the most, such as France or China, do not collect information on their citizens’ religious loyalties or ties. Whereas the religious feel compelled to survey religion the secularists do not feel motivated to survey irreligion. Thus counts of non-religious populations (Nones) and unbelief inevitably originate from data collections focused on revealing information about the importance or significance of religion. Some countries such as Denmark still automatically register all citizens, irrespective of personal belief, as religious (as a member of the Folkekirk, the state established Danish Peoples’ Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church) unless they officially opt out.

Most people who have attended a social science or survey methodology course soon learn that the way questions are worded affects the results that are obtained. This is particularly a concern in an arena which is ideologically contested and where terminology is not agreed. In the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) series which I have led since 1990 we make clear distinctions between Belonging questions – what is your religion, if any? – Belief questions – Does God exist? – and Behavior questions – Do you pray? or Did you have a religious marriage ceremony? The pattern of answers in the three realms does not run in parallel across most populations because the secularization process varies across these realms. The general tendency is that among both people and societies, religious behavior erodes first, then religious belief declines and only later is religious belonging or identification finally abandoned.

This secularization process causes problems in enumerating non-religious populations, which outcomes are definitional confusion and conflicting numbers. Countries that ask a belonging question in their national censuses ask with a fixed list. The question order used is not just a methodological issue but also a symbolic one. If No Religion or a specific non-theist response category is included at all it is found inevitably at the end or bottom of the column. There is a strong positive presumption evident. The medium is indeed the message! Of all the major surveys only the U.S. ARIS series has an open ended question without any prompts or suggested responses.
By way of contrast most non-governmental social and opinion surveys ask a belief question. Often they include a range of theological responses that can reveal religious fundamentalists, liberal believers, deists, agnostics, atheists etc. Unfortunately those who report and archive religious statistics tend to mix up belonging (identification), membership and belief. The result is that estimates of the non-religious population worldwide and in specific countries vary wildly. The result is conflicting numbers and trends as I shall demonstrate.

The most cited data on non-theist populations and beliefs across the globe emerges from a few data archives. The international religious data in the World Christian Database (WCD), and its print predecessor, the World Christian Encyclopedia (WCE), have been used frequently in academic studies and the popular press. Other common sources for cross-national data sets on religious composition are two survey-based data sets and two government-sponsored data sets: the World Values Survey (WVS) and the Pew Global Attitudes Project (Pew), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the U.S. State Department (State Department). Data on percent nonreligious are not highly correlated among the five data sets. Each data set treats the nonreligious in its own way. Some equate the category to the absence of belonging to a religious organization, while others treat it as classifying oneself as holding a nonreligious belief system.

The WCD is unique in that it estimates the percent not associated with any religion, while data on nonreligious people are inconsistent and sparse in the other data sets. In the government-collected data, nonreligious categories appear only in certain countries, which may be because there are too few people religiously unaffiliated, or because “nonreligious” is not considered a religious category by governments. Pew and VVS include a nonreligious category for most, but not all, countries surveyed.

The survey-based data sets record the religious identity of all people surveyed and consequently include various religious categories, so unlike the WCD they do not have estimates for the same religious groups in each country. There are 51 categories in Pew and 86 in the WVS, but categories differ by country. The other full-country data sets (State Department, CIA) only include estimations for the majority or large religious groups in each country.

While all of the data sets have mostly complete data for percentages of Christians and Muslims, data on percentage of Buddhists, Hindus, and nonreligious are incomplete or missing in various data sets. The nonreligious category has few observations in State Department and CIA data and is best represented in the WCD, WVS, and Pew. For example, while the CIA declares both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia to be 100 percent Muslim, the WCD identifies adherents of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity etc. that account for 7.8 percent of Saudi Arabia’s population and 16.6 percent of Bahrain’s. The 1991 Bahrain census lends credibility to the WCD estimates by showing that about 18 percent of Bahrain’s population is non-Muslim. To quote from an Iranian contributor to a volume I edited:

“In a country where an honest answer to simple questions such as “Are you a Muslim? Do you believe in God? Is the Holy Koran the Word of God?” … led to mass executions in the 1980s, it is very difficult to know who is secular and to what extent.”

Statistics on the former Communist bloc are also contentious but the bias is probably towards overestimating irreligion. Albania, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan share a history of religious repression under Communist rule followed by renewed, yet often severely limited, public religiosity after the collapse of the Soviet Union. WCD data reflect part of this story, showing percent nonreligious/atheists growing from zero to 64 percent in Albania and from zero to 42 percent in Uzbekistan between 1990 and 1997. However, the WCD does not show nonreligious/atheist percentages declining to pre-Communism levels after the collapse of Communist governments; rather, they remain on the order of 20 to 25 percent. While these estimates may reflect the reduced significance of religion in post-Communist countries, CIA data and Pew survey data (for Uzbekistan) argue that such high estimates for percent nonreligious are unwarranted. Pew reports that 96 percent of Uzbeks identify with Islam or Christianity.

Most notably, the nonreligious population estimates vary widely between most of the data. This is because the criteria and groups used to designate the nonreligious are not agreed. It is unclear what method is used in the WCD to measure the nonreligious. In the WVS and Pew, respondents are classified as nonreligious only if they choose the category “none” or “unaffiliated” in response to questions about belonging to a religion (those that did not know or did not respond are not included). The CIA provides data on the nonreligious for only 12 of 227 countries because of its method; it tends to list the major religions in each country and group the rest in the “other” category. Therefore, if atheism or nonreligious is not a major religious group in the country the CIA does not mention it. The State Department pays more attention to the nonreligious than the CIA, giving estimates of nonreligious in 83 of 176 countries.

In Latin America the most “secular populations” are to be found in Uruguay and Argentina. A 2006 official survey in Uruguay found that 27.8 percent of the population “believe in God but do not claim a religious affiliation.” In addition 14.6 percent of Uruguays were not accounted for so presumably they were neither members nor believers. This suggests that 42 percent of the population is in the “No Religion” column in terms of religious identification. In Argentina a 2008 survey showed that 11.3 percent were “indifferent to religion.” The recently released Mexican census showed that the No Religion population had risen from four percent in 2000 to five percent in 2010 but the percentage of the population declining to specify a religion in the questionnaire rose from one percent in 2000 to three percent in 2010.
the same direction as our American ARIS findings (15 percent Nones) as far as religious identification in Government censuses is concerned. The No Religion category was reported by 15.1 percent of the population in Great Britain in 2001, 15.5 percent of Australians in 2001 and 19 percent of Canadians in 2004 (GSS). These Nones in each of these English-speaking nations tend to be younger, more male and more urban than the total population.

One might think the situation and trends would be clearer in sophisticated and ideologically free Europe but confusion reigns there since time series based on religious censuses are rare. The Eurobarometer reports that 18 percent of Europeans believe in neither “God nor a Spirit” and this varies from a low of five percent in Malta up to 25 percent in Germany and 33 percent in France. Using a different question a 2006 Financial Times Harris Poll reported that the proportion of atheists and agnostics at 27 percent in Italy, 41 percent in Spain, 45 percent in Germany, 52 percent in UK and 64 percent in France. As far as belonging is concerned, Pew reported that 27 percent of the French had no religion while the CIA reported that by religion a mere 4 percent of the French are “unaffiliated”!

We can see some consensus at least in the geographical profile of unbelief by continent. The world population of figures cited by atheist, Humanist and freethinking organizations can usually be traced back to figures cited by Adherents.com which in turn come from the Encyclopedia Britannica. The proportion of the population worldwide is given as 16 percent in 1995 and 23 percent in 2005. Those included consist of “secular, non-religious, agnostic and atheist.” Sometimes the caveat is provided that half this population is theist by belief. What is agreed is that most Nones live in Asia and very few in Africa. Of 841 million non-religious persons in 1995 it was estimated that 707 million were Asians and only 2.5 million were Africans. The U.S. State Department cites a 2010 Chinese survey which found that 67 percent or 800 million Chinese were non-believers. Everyone also agrees that all Africans are religious and believers in something. The State Department mentions witchcraft and animism in its reports on African countries but never atheism or any other non-theistic belief. Finally the CIA reports that in 2010, 11.8 percent of the world's population was “non-religious” and that 2.32 percent were atheists though this amazing precision to two decimal places is slightly undermined by the caveat that this statistic is an estimate.

The Rise of the Non-religious in Malawi

We cannot consider the rise of the non-religious in Malawi without first considering the history of the last 150 years. Malawi is an artificial construct of European colonialism which, at the Conference of Berlin in 1884-5, carved up the continent without consideration for ethnic differences or natural boundaries.

British explorer, Dr. David Livingstone, after his travels in the mid-1850's, revealed to Europe the evils of the slave trade in what is now Malawi. He proposed that Christianity and regular trade would put an end to it, inspiring Christian groups to send out missionaries and traders. An unofficial European/Christian 'administration' had established itself prior to the Berlin Conference. Although Portugal had prior claims to be the dominant power in the Shire Highlands of southern Malawi where Christianity and regular trade were taking hold, the strength of the church lobby was enough for the United Kingdom to successfully press its claims. It can be seen, therefore, that the Christian churches established political influence before 1891 when Britain formally established a protectorate with Henry Hamilton Johnson, an atheist (unusual for the times), as its first administrator. So well established were the churches, especially the Blantyre Mission, at the centre of settler and trade activity, that it had its own prison.

Contemporaneously, two other immigrant groups were causing considerable disruption to the local tribes. These were the warlike Ngoni (related to the better-known Zulu) from the south and the Yao, from the east, as middle-men for the coast Arabs or as traders, slaves and ivory being the main commodities. These groups were acquiring domination over several parts of the country, a process that was still ongoing when Britain assumed power.

The British administration settled the Yao 'problem' in 1885. The northern Ngoni resisted until much later. The British 'overlords' brought with them Christianity – the religion of the conquerors. This de-facto state religion supplanted local religious beliefs although many of the ancient customs are still adhered to by people who consider themselves to be Christian. The Yao introduced Islam, the religion of their coast-Arab partners. Islam soon supplanted the traditional religion. Within 30 years all