

Response to “The Rise of ‘No Religion’”

Dr Fraser Watts

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Linda Woodhead has been a leading figure, first in documenting the widespread move from religion to being ‘spiritual but not religious’ in her Kendall project, and more recently in documenting the decline in established forms of religion such as the Church of England. It is a pleasure and honour to add this footnote to what she has said. I agree with her position. There has been a steady decline in adherence to the Church of England for some decades now, and a corresponding increase in ‘Nones’, i.e. people of no religion.

However, I have some hesitations about the category of ‘Nones’, as Nones are so heterogeneous. It may not be helpful to lump disparate people together in this way. Sociologists often tend to be ‘lumpers’; psychologists like me tend to be ‘splitters’.

One big difference among Nones is that some are actively hostile to religion; others are indifferent to it. As Linda has said, the main increase seems to have been in the indifferent people, rather than in the Dawkins-ite camp of people who are hostile to religion.

The other big difference is that some of the Nones are ‘spiritual but not religious’ (SBNR), others are not ‘spiritual’ at all. I think it is hard to assess the extent of the SBNR movement as, if you ask people whether they are ‘spiritual’, many people are not sure what you are asking. I suspect that the spiritual group (or at least those who are potentially spiritual) may be larger than we have yet been able to demonstrate.

Some people have thought that being spiritual but not religious was a passing fad, characteristic of the baby-boomers, but really just part of the death-throws of religion, and something that would pass. I don’t think that is right. There is now enough work on millennials who are spiritual but not religious to think this trend is here to stay. Religion may continue to decline, but I don’t think spirituality will.

Spirituality is often criticised for being a vague concept. One of the problems it is that it is multi-faceted, a many-headed hydra. Spirituality prioritises experience more consistently than religion, and links experience to the predominant form of spiritual practice which is, of course, some form of meditation. But there is more to spirituality than that. It is sometimes supposed that spirituality, unlike religion, lacks beliefs and has done away with metaphysics. I don’t think that is correct. At the most general level there is belief that there is ‘something more’. However, there are also more specific elements such as belief in the after-life, which is actually increasing, while belief in God is declining. Belief in the soul, and in angels, is also increasing.

One of the puzzling aspects of spirituality concerns how individualistic it is. In some ways non-religious spirituality does seem rather individualistic, in that it prioritises the transformation of the individual. It often seems less interested in social objectives, such as peace and reconciliation, and tends to see those as being achieved solely through the transformation of the individual. At its worst, spirituality is rather narcissistic. On the other hand, people who are spiritual but not religious are all much the same, all out of the same identikit mould, all responding in the same ways to the same cultural trends, and not really functioning as autonomous individuals at all.

What is it about religion that the Nones don't like? Some are against the concept of 'God'. As cultural historians like Michael Buckley have pointed out, many of the arguments against God used by atheists were first used in theological debates. The objection of atheists is to an over-anthropomorphic concept of God, but many religious people who are theologically educated are opposed to that too.

Some Nones are opposed to the Church. As a failing Church becomes more concerned with its own survival, it becomes increasingly irrelevant in the eyes of many people. There is also a new feeling that the church is not just over-strict about some moral issues, especially sex, but that it is actually immoral in its views about women and gays.

I think that secularity also has religious origins, and am persuaded by the argument advanced by Simon Phipps back in the 60s, that it arises from an over-strong and heretical ecclesiology that imagines that God belongs to the church and that it has got him sussed; and in the flip side of that, which is the lack of theological attention to the non-ecclesial world. Secularity can be seen as a protest against those theological mistakes. As an American friend put it, secular people are not so much aliens from outer space as the pissed-off relatives of religious people.

Another important factor is the widespread shift to a pragmatic culture that always asks, 'what is in this for me?' Religion is generally still locked into a culture of duties and obligations, whereas spirituality has made the shift to the pragmatic culture in which we now live, which always looks for benefits. People practice mindfulness because they see the value of it. If people could see how some collective forms of spirituality would lead to a better society, I think there could potentially be widespread interest in that. However, the churches are mostly too blinkered to be able to give that kind of lead, and they would no longer be a widely acceptable source of such a lead.

Is there any hope for religion? I am not sure, but there may be. One reason for continuing to think so is that I see atheism and secularity as deviant religious movements with whom there could in principle be some kind of reconciliation. Atheism often functions like a religious movement, in its proselytising zeal and in its quasi-religious activities, such as the Sunday Assembly. Also, traditional forms of religion are still embedded in some parts of our culture, such as Oxbridge and public schools, as Linda has said. Where religion is well-embedded, well-resourced, and attracts levels of support that reach a critical mass, it can still thrive in a way that surprises.

Beyond that, I suspect that we are hard-wired for some kind of spirituality. Incidentally, I hold the hypothesis, which I can mention but have no time to defend, that spirituality is primarily hard-wired whereas religion is more culturally embedded. For examples, levels of spiritual experience, broadly defined (as David Hay does) seem fairly constant across different societies, regardless of different levels of religious affiliation.

Also, I believe that religion started with embodied practices such as trance dancing that led to unprecedented levels of social bonding, mediated by collective endorphin release. Some forms of religion can still be good for social bonding. Where that happens, I suspect that endorphins are usually involved, though that is a rather speculative claim. I suspect that where religion thrives, there is usually some intense process of social bonding going on, and we need to understand better how that works.