

# Talking About Religion in a Secular Age

## How Religious “Nones” Perceive the Value of Religion

Written by Samuel J. Abrams

November 2025



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A Sutherland Institute Policy Report

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**“Faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America. The church is people. It’s not a building; it’s not an institution, even. It is relationships between one person and the next.”**

—Robert D. Putnam, *[Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community](#)*

# Table of Contents

4	Executive Summary
5	Section 1: Introduction – A Methodological Innovation
7	Section 2: Methodology and Innovation
8	Section 3: Initial Perceptions and Baseline Attitudes
11	Section 4: The Experimental Intervention and Results
14	Section 5: Heterogeneity Within Nones and Generational Dynamics
18	Section 6: Why This Survey Is Valuable
20	Section 7: Civil Society and Policy Implications
24	Section 8: Future Research Directions
27	Section 9: Broader Societal Implications
30	Conclusion: Transforming Understanding of Religious Change
32	Appendix: Complete Survey Data Tables

# Executive Summary

This report examines an experimental survey that enlightens our understanding of religiously unaffiliated Americans (“nones”) and their perceptions of religion’s societal role. Commissioned by Sutherland Institute and conducted by Heart+Mind Strategies from June 27 to July 15, 2025, this study employs an experimental design rather than traditional observational approaches.

The study surveyed 1,106 U.S. adults, including 395 spiritual nones. Unlike the [Pew Religious Landscape Study’s descriptive approach](#) with 36,908 respondents, this survey uses a pre-post experimental intervention, which helps us understand what changes religious attitudes.

The findings are remarkable: While 77% of nones initially viewed religion as “part of the problem,” exposure to factual information about religion’s civic

contributions produced a 23-percentage point shift, with only 54% maintaining negative views post-intervention. This demonstrates that evidence-based communication can meaningfully influence perceptions, even among skeptics.

The timing is critical. Religious nones now comprise 28% of U.S. adults – larger than Catholics or evangelical Protestants – with [projections suggesting](#) growth to 34-52% by 2070. The survey reveals profound heterogeneity within this group: Atheists show a 22-point shift (from 14% to 36%) and agnostics a 20-point shift (from 15% to 35%) after exposure to factual information about religion, while those identifying as “nothing in particular” show a 25-point shift (from 31% to 56%). Even among skeptics, majorities acknowledge religion’s contributions to emergency shelter (63%), disaster relief (61%), and healthcare (57%).

# Section 1: Introduction – A Methodological Revolution

***“All those statistics – the ones about decline – point toward massive theological discontent. People still believe in God. They just do not believe in the God proclaimed and worshipped by conventional religious organizations.”***

—Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded: Finding God in the World*

## The Rise of the Nones and the Innovation Gap

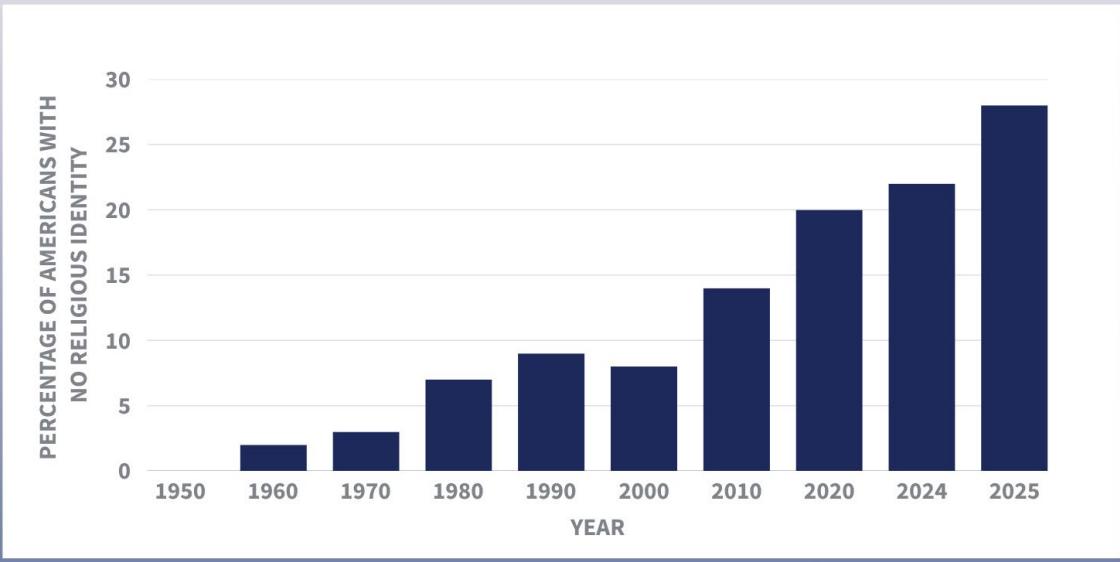
Religious **nones** have surged from 7% of Americans in the 1990s to 28% today, yet our understanding of this population has been limited by observational research methods. As [Gregory Smith](#) at Pew notes, **nones** are “among the most

strongly and consistently liberal and Democratic constituencies,” yet paradoxically show lower civic engagement – a puzzle traditional surveys struggle to explain.

The 2025 Sutherland Institute/Heart+Mind survey breaks new ground through experimental design. While Pew’s valuable 2023-24 Religious Landscape

**Figure 1. The Rise of the Nones**

*Projections range from 34%-52% by 2070 per Pew*



Study surveyed 36,908 people to document what Americans believe, it does not answer whether or how beliefs change. The Sutherland survey's three-phase experimental protocol – baseline measurement, information treatment, and post-treatment assessment – enables explanation of changes in attitudes toward religion.

This methodological innovation addresses longstanding challenges. Recent research revealed online surveys may overstate nones due to differential nonresponse. The within-subject experimental design makes each respondent their own control, reducing such biases while revealing that many negative attitudes stem from information deficits rather than fixed ideology.

## Theoretical Framework

Contemporary scholarship grapples with declining religious affiliation alongside persistent recognition of religion's societal benefits. The secularization thesis has given way to theories of religious transformation, with José Casanova's "[public religions](#)" and Charles Taylor's "[secular age](#)" frameworks explaining religious-secular competition in pluralistic societies. This survey provides empirical testing of these theories, demonstrating that attitudes toward religion being positive or negative in society remain more fluid than fixed.

# Section 2: Methodology and Innovation

## Experimental Design

The survey employed a pre-post experimental design with 1,106 adults. Sample audience consisted of a quota-sampled base of 1,006 adults alongside an oversample of 100 nones, for a total audience of 1,106 adults and 395 nones:

**Phase 1:** Baseline attitude measurement (Q201) – whether religion is “part of the problem” or “solution”

**Phase 2a:** Information treatment (Q204) – 15 conceptual statements about religion’s societal contributions

**Phase 2b:** Information treatment (Q205) – 15 factual statements about religion’s societal contributions

**Phase 3:** Post-treatment measurement (Q207) – reassessment of attitudes

The information treatment included verifiable facts from credible sources, such as:

- “Faith-based organizations provide most emergency shelter services”
- “Religion contributes \$1.2 trillion annually to the U.S. economy”
- “Nearly 75% of FEMA disaster relief organizations are faith-based”

The experimental approach addresses selection bias (through within-subject comparison), social desirability bias (using factual rather than moral claims), and enables heterogeneous effects analysis revealing subgroup differences invisible in descriptive surveys.

**Figure 2. Methodological Advantages**

Dimension	Traditional Surveys (Pew RLS)	Experimental Design (Sutherland)
Method	Observational	Experimental causation
Core Question	What do people believe?	Can beliefs change? How?
Validity	High external, low internal	High internal, moderate external
Findings	Correlations and trends	Causal mechanisms

## Section 3: Initial Perceptions and Baseline Attitudes

**B**efore any experimental intervention, the survey captured baseline attitudes that reveal the depth of religious skepticism among nones. Figure 3 shows the stark divide between how nones and Americans generally view religion's societal role.

These numbers tell a powerful story. Among all Americans, opinion is relatively balanced, with a slight majority (56%) seeing religion as part of the solution to societal challenges. But among nones, the picture is dramatically different – more than three-quarters (77%) view religion as problematic. The 33-percentage point gap between nones and

others represents a significant gap in American public opinion.

Perhaps even more telling is the intensity of these views. Nearly one-third of nones (32%) say religion is “definitely” part of the problem – eight times higher than the 4% who say it’s definitely part of the solution. This suggests not casual skepticism, but deeply held conviction. Understanding whether these intense negative views can shift becomes crucial for any hope of religious-secular dialogue.

**Figure 3. Religion – Problem or Solution for Society?**

Response	Total Sample	Spiritual Nones	Gap
<b>Part of Solution (NET)</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>33 pts</b>
Definitely	24%	4%	
Somewhat	32%	19%	
<b>Part of Problem (NET)</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>77%</b>	<b>33 pts</b>
Definitely	30%	45%	
Somewhat	15%	32%	

Yet the survey also reveals nuance in how nones think about religion. When asked to evaluate different aspects separately, a fascinating distinction emerges. While only 11% of nones view religious organizations positively, 46% believe religious freedom is a net positive, suggesting nones hold sophisticated views distinguishing between institutional power (which they distrust) and individual liberty (which they support). This finding has profound implications for how religious communities might engage with secular audiences – appeals to shared principles of

freedom may resonate where institutional defenses fail.

## Recognition of Specific Benefits Before Information Treatment

Even in their initial skepticism, nones show selective acknowledgment of religion's contributions. When asked about specific potential benefits before receiving any information treatment (Q204), the pattern of their responses is revealing:

**Figure 4. Benefits of Religion**

% agreeing with the following (statements edited for brevity)	Total Sample	Spiritual Nones
Religious beliefs help people stay hopeful in hard times	79%	54%
Religion provides people with a sense of meaning in life	73%	52%
Religious communities offer strong social support and belonging	71%	48%
Religious practices like prayer help reduce stress and anxiety	71%	41%
Religious organizations play huge role in humanitarian relief	69%	43%
People of faith are large source of volunteers and donations	66%	41%
Religious teachings help guide moral decisions	64%	32%
Religion helps instill sense of right and wrong	64%	32%
People of faith motivated to work for social justice	58%	25%
Religious organizations encourage civic engagement and voting	58%	34%
Religious schools/universities major contributor to education	57%	29%
Religious faith can discourage risky behaviors	54%	35%
Religious people report better mental health	51%	22%
Being religious linked to better health outcomes	50%	21%
Religious people are happier in their lives	50%	18%

This hierarchy is instructive. Nones most readily acknowledge religion's psychological and communal benefits – providing hope, meaning, and social support during life's challenges. They show moderate

recognition of religion's civic contributions like volunteerism and charity. But they strongly resist claims about religion's moral authority or about personal happiness and health benefits.

# Section 4: The Experimental Intervention and Results

The heart of the survey's value lies in its experimental element. After measuring baseline attitudes, respondents were presented with 15 factual statements about religion's societal contributions, each drawn from credible sources like national newspapers, academic journals, and think tanks. These weren't opinions or theological arguments but verifiable facts about measurable contributions.

## Information Treatment Effects

The impact of this information exposure was dramatic. Figure 5 shows how attitudes shifted from before to after the information treatment.

To understand the significance of these shifts, consider that most survey experiments in political science produce attitude changes of 3-10 percentage points. A 5-point shift is considered substantial, and 10 points is remarkable. The 23-point shift among

nones – literally doubling the proportion who view religion as part of the solution – is powerful and hard to overlook.

## Detailed Change Analysis

The survey also tracked the direction and magnitude of individual-level changes (Figure 6).

Notably, 41% of nones individually shifted toward viewing religion more positively, while only 7% became more negative – a nearly 6:1 ratio favoring positive change.

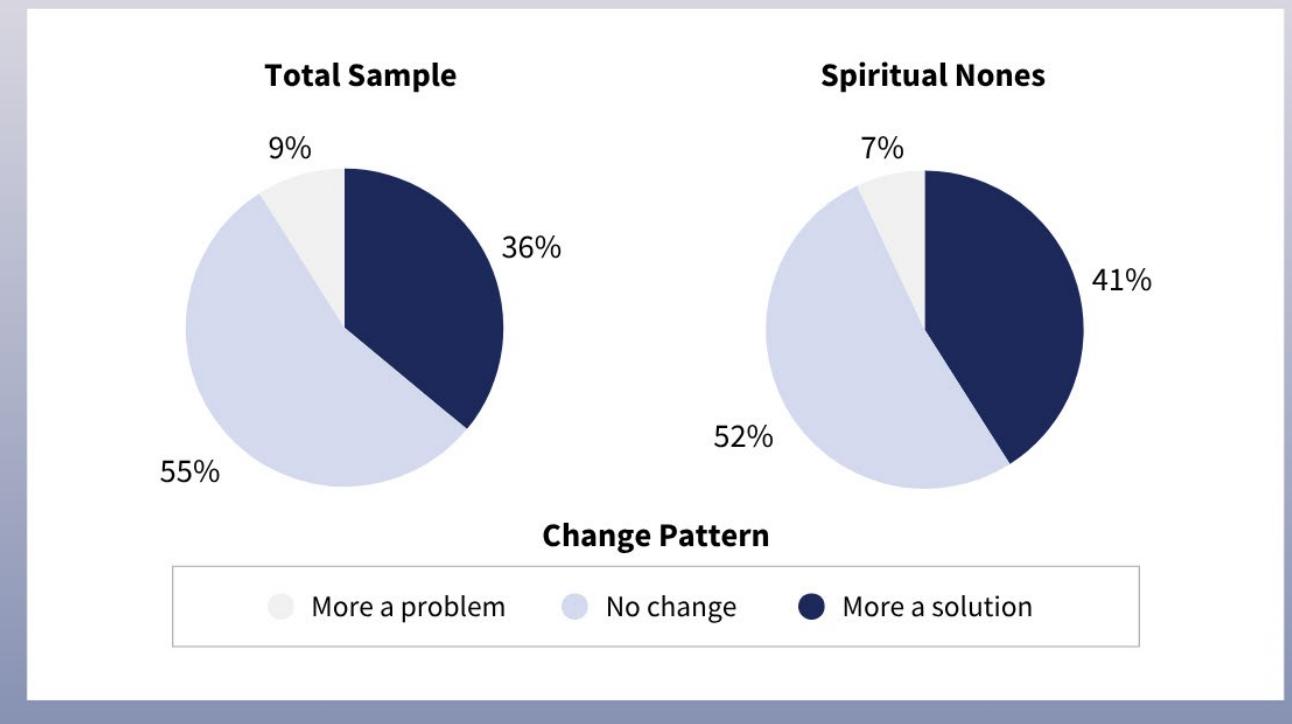
## Differential Responses by Information Type (Q205)

Not all facts proved equally persuasive. The survey tracked which specific pieces of information resonated most strongly with nones (Figure 7).

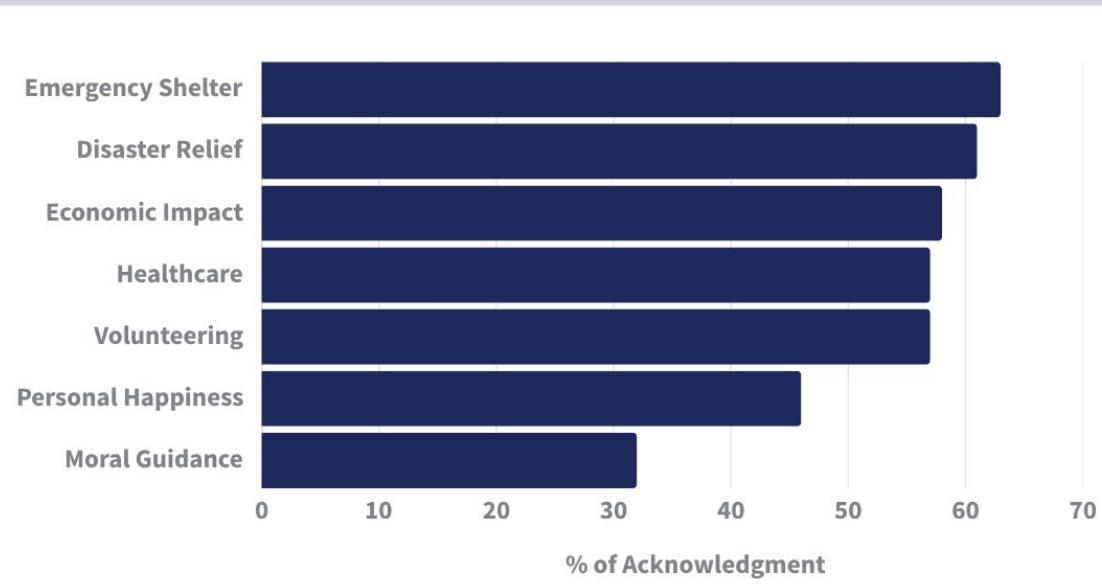
**Figure 5. Pre-Post Attitude Change**

Response	Total Sample	Spiritual Nones
Pre: "Part of Solution"	56%	23%
Post: "Part of Solution"	71%	46%
Change	+15 pts	+23 pts

**Figure 6. Detailed Change Analysis**



**Figure 7. Acknowledgment of Specific Facts About Religion's Contributions**



**Figure 8. Percentage of Nones Acknowledging  
“Benefits to a Great Extent/Totally”**

Factual Statement	Total Sample	Spiritual Nones
Faith-based organizations provide most emergency shelter services	48%	30%
Religion contributes \$1.2 trillion annually to U.S. economy	46%	27%
Nearly 75% of FEMA disaster organizations are faith-based	46%	27%
Americans who attend services more likely to volunteer	45%	22%
One in five hospital beds provided by religious organizations	41%	23%
Students at religious colleges pursue helping careers	41%	22%
Religious groups effective in foster care system	39%	20%
Regular attendance associated with lower suicide risk	38%	18%
Young religious Americans report more community belonging	38%	16%
Religious people give more to charity (including secular)	37%	16%
Actively religious more likely to describe as “very happy”	35%	13%
Women attending services with partners report greater happiness	35%	14%
Religious Americans less likely to report depression	31%	12%
Majority of immigrant/refugee support is faith-based	31%	18%
1 in 4 students educated in faith-based institutions	26%	10%

When including those who acknowledge benefits at an additional level (i.e., not just “a great extent” or “totally”), the percentages are substantially higher – for example, 63% of nones acknowledge faith-based emergency shelter provision and 61% recognize disaster relief contributions.

This gradient from concrete to abstract is striking. Nearly two-thirds of nones acknowledge religion’s

role in providing emergency shelter and disaster relief – tangible, measurable contributions to society. A solid majority recognizes economic and healthcare contributions. But when claims shift toward personal happiness or moral guidance, acknowledgment drops sharply.

# Section 5: Heterogeneity Within Nones and Generational Dynamics

One of the survey's most important contributions is revealing that "nones" are far from monolithic. Different subgroups showed dramatically different responses to the information treatment (Figure 9).

These differences are not subtle variations but fundamental divergences in responsiveness. Atheists and agnostics – often lumped together with other nones – show the most resistance to positive information about religion. Their 21-point increase from 14% to 35% is substantial, yet their overall endorsement of religion as part of the solution remains far lower than other subgroups. This pattern suggests that while exposure to positive information can move some views, many atheists and agnostics hold more crystallized, ideologically grounded opposition to religion that resists deeper attitudinal change.

In stark contrast, those who describe their religion as "nothing in particular" – the largest subgroup of

nones – show remarkable openness. A majority (56%) view religion as part of the solution after information exposure, up from 31% initially, a 25-point increase. This suggests their disaffiliation stems more from indifference or negative experiences than principled opposition. Similarly, former religious individuals moved from 31% to 54%, a 23-point gain, indicating meaningful potential for re-engagement. Together, these groups represent the "moveable middle" of American secularization.

## Childhood Religious Background (Q209)

An important context for understanding nones' journey is their childhood religious experience (Figure 10).

Nearly half (49%) of current nones considered religion important during their childhood, suggesting their disaffiliation represents a departure from

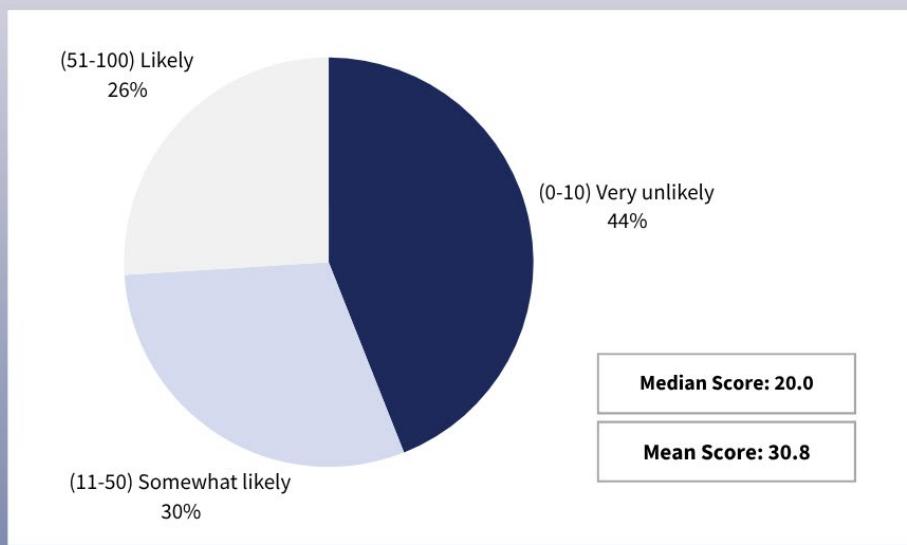
**Figure 9. Differential Treatment Effects by Subgroup**

Subgroup	Initial "Solution"	Post "Solution"	Change
Atheists/Agnostics	14%	35%	+21 pts
Nothing in Particular	31%	56%	+25 pts
Former Religious	31%	54%	+23 pts

**Figure 10. Importance of Religion  
Growing Up Spiritual Nones**

<b>Important (NET)</b>	<b>49%</b>
Extremely important	7%
Very important	13%
Somewhat important	30%
<b>Not Important (NET)</b>	
Not very important	24%
Not at all important	27%

**Figure 11. Likelihood of Future Interest in  
God (0-100 scale) Spiritual Nones**



earlier religious exposure rather than lifelong secular identity. This finding has implications for re-engagement strategies, as many nones have familiarity with religious concepts and communities.

## Generation Z: The Complex Reality

According to the [Survey Center on American life](#), Generation Z has become “the least religious generation” with 34% identifying as religiously unaffiliated. Comparatively, per the Survey Center, 29% of Millennials and 25% of Gen X are religiously unaffiliated. In contrast, fewer than one in five (18 percent) Baby Boomers and only 9 percent of the silent generation are religiously unaffiliated. The reality on the ground, however, is more nuanced than simple secularization:

### Religious Identification by Generation (2021):

- Silent Generation: 83% Christian, 9% Unaffiliated
- Baby Boomers: 75% Christian, 18% Unaffiliated
- Generation X: 71% Christian, 25% Unaffiliated
- Millennials: 64% Christian, 29% Unaffiliated
- Generation Z: 56% Christian, 34% Unaffiliated

As [Gallup notes](#), today “...among young adults, religious ‘nones’ rival Protestants as the largest religious subgroup.”

However, researcher [Ryan Burge notes](#): “We’ve seen the plateau of non-religion in America. Gen Z is not that much less religious than their parents,

and that’s a big deal.” This stabilization represents a significant shift from decades of steady decline.

## What Gen Z Actually Wants:

- **Digital-First Engagement:** Primary discovery happens online
- **Authenticity Over Polish:** Values genuine faith over performance
- **Focus on Jesus, Not Christianity:** More open to Jesus than institutional religion
- **Intellectual Engagement:** Want honest answers, not platitudes

**The Gender Divide:** A crucial pattern is emerging. According to the [Public Religion Research Institute](#), while the “proportion of religiously unaffiliated men ages 18 to 29 has remained roughly steady since 2013 at 35%, the share among women in that age group has increased from 29% in 2013 to 40% in 2024.” This gender divergence has significant implications for religious engagement strategies.

## Future Religious Interest (Q208)

Despite their current disaffiliation, many nones remain open to future religious engagement (Figure 11).

While 44% indicate very low likelihood of future religious interest, a majority (56%) show at least some openness (>10 on the scale), with 26% showing substantial likelihood (>50). The mean score of 30.8, while low, exceeds zero-probability atheistic

certainty, suggesting fluid boundaries between religious and secular identity.

## Life Satisfaction Paradox (Q210)

The survey reveals a complex picture of nones' existential state (Figure 12).

This presents an intriguing paradox: While 56% of nones report being satisfied with their lives,

32% simultaneously acknowledge something important is missing. This suggests that material and social satisfaction can coexist with existential searching – a finding with profound implications for understanding the “something missing” population’s openness to religious messages.

**Figure 12. Life Satisfaction Statement & Response**

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
"There is still something important missing in my life"	32%	27%	42%
"I am satisfied with my life"	56%	21%	23%

# Section 6: Why This Survey Is Valuable

## Methodological Innovation

To understand the contribution of this survey, consider what previous research could and couldn't tell us. The Pew Religious Landscape Study, with its impressive 36,908 respondents, can precisely document that 28% of Americans are *nones*, track this growth over time, and describe their demographic characteristics. But it cannot answer whether these attitudes are immutable or whether specific interventions might change them.

The experimental design transforms our capability from description to causation. By exposing some respondents to information and measuring the resulting change, the survey establishes that:

- Religious attitudes can change substantially even among skeptics
- Specific types of information (concrete contributions) are more persuasive than others (moral claims)
- Different subgroups of *nones* respond differently to the same information
- Much religious opposition stems from information deficits rather than fixed ideology

This isn't just academic – it provides actionable intelligence for religious organizations, policymakers, and civic leaders trying to bridge religious-secular divides.

## Addressing the Stabilization Question

Recent Pew data suggested the [growth of \*nones\*](#) may have “plateaued” around 28-30% after years of rapid increase. Some interpreted this as a natural ceiling – perhaps everyone inclined toward disaffiliation had already left. But this survey’s findings suggest a different interpretation.

The dramatic attitude shifts observed (21 points among atheists/agnostics and 25 points among “nothing in particulars”) indicate that *nones* boundaries remain highly permeable. Rather than a fixed ceiling, the current 28-30% may represent a dynamic equilibrium with continuous movement in both directions – ongoing disaffiliation balanced by potential re-engagement among those whose opposition stems from misunderstanding rather than conviction.

## Theoretical Contributions

The survey provides empirical evidence for several important theoretical propositions:

**Information Deficit Theory:** The substantial attitude changes demonstrate that negative views of religion partially stem from a lack of knowledge about its contributions. This challenges pure ideological explanations of secularization.

**Attitude Malleability:** The finding that even deeply skeptical views can shift with appropriate information suggests religious attitudes are more constructed than essential, more responsive than resistant.

**Institutional-Principle Distinction:** The empirical validation that *nones* oppose religious institutions while supporting religious freedom principles confirms theoretical distinctions between organizational and cultural dimensions of religion.

**Heterogeneous Secularization:** Both atheists/agnostics and “nothing in particular” respondents showed sizable gains after exposure, but their overall levels diverge sharply. Atheists and agnostics rose from 14% to 35%, while “nothing in particular” respondents climbed from 31% to 56%. Secularization, then, is not uniform – it reflects distinct pathways shaped by belief intensity and personal experience.

# Section 7: Civil Society and Policy Implications

## The Civic Engagement Challenge

One of the most pressing concerns about the growing population of religiously unaffiliated Americans is not simply their religious skepticism, but their markedly lower levels of civic participation. Research by the [Pew Research Center](#) shows significant gaps across multiple dimensions of civic life between nones and those who are religiously affiliated.

In the 2022 midterm elections, [Pew found](#) that only 39% of nones voted, compared to 51% of religiously affiliated adults, a 12-percentage point gap that has serious implications for democratic representation. Similarly, volunteerism among nones is much lower: Just 17% reported volunteering in the past year, compared to 27% of the religiously affiliated, a 10-point gap.

While this survey did not directly measure charitable giving, Pew's broader research consistently finds that religiously affiliated individuals are more likely to donate both money and time to charitable causes, religious and secular alike. This pattern indicates that as religious participation declines, nonprofit organizations may face challenges in sustaining financial and volunteer support.

Yet the findings from our survey offer reason for hope. Majorities of nones acknowledge the significant civic contributions made by religious organizations: 63% recognize the role of faith-based groups in providing emergency shelter, and

61% acknowledge their leadership in disaster relief efforts. This suggests that nones do not reject civic engagement in principle. Instead, they may lack the institutional structures that historically facilitated such engagement, such as congregations that coordinated volunteer drives, organized charitable efforts, and mobilized voters.

The challenge for secular society, then, is to develop functional alternatives that can play a similar role. In some communities, experimental secular "congregations" are emerging, providing a sense of belonging and purpose without theological commitments. Other cities have invested in strengthening civic organizations that are independent of religious institutions but offer comparable opportunities for service and connection.

Given that 32% of nones in our survey report feeling that "something important is missing" in their lives, these efforts may find particularly receptive audiences. If successful, they could help bridge the civic participation gap and ensure that essential social functions continue to thrive even in an increasingly secular America.

## Policy Recommendations

As American society becomes increasingly religiously diverse and secular, policymakers face a profound challenge: How do we safeguard the role of faith communities while respecting constitutional

boundaries? For generations, religious organizations have been among the most important builders of strong families, healthy neighborhoods, and vibrant civic life. The data from this survey underscore a reality that many in the Latter-day Saint and broader faith community already know firsthand: Faith-based groups are irreplaceable pillars of service and stability.

The survey reveals a stark divide in public perceptions. While only 11% of religiously unaffiliated Americans view religious organizations positively, nearly half (46%) support religious freedom as a guiding principle. This suggests that even among those who are skeptical of organized religion, there remains a deep-seated respect for the fundamental right to live one's faith freely. For policymakers, this finding is an invitation to focus on shared values and common ground rather than fueling further polarization.

## Lead with Results and Service

When discussing faith-based initiatives, policymakers should focus on what works rather than abstract ideological debates. In a pluralistic society, the best way to demonstrate the value of religion is through tangible service and measurable outcomes.

This survey shows that even among nones, there is broad acknowledgment of religion's role in meeting urgent human needs:

- 63% of nones say that faith-based organizations benefit society by providing most emergency shelter services in the U.S.
- 61% acknowledge that nearly three-quarters of FEMA disaster relief partners are religiously affiliated

These numbers highlight an essential truth: Churches, synagogues, mosques, and other faith-based groups have been the first responders and the safety net for countless communities. Rather than seeking to replace these institutions with expanded government programs – a dubious enterprise given how big a part of the safety net religious organizations are – policymakers should work to strengthen and support faith-based organizations as partners in solving social problems.

This means framing public conversations around service, not politics. For example, when Congress or state legislatures consider disaster relief funding, the focus should be on the proven track record of faith groups in delivering aid quickly and effectively, not on divisive rhetoric about church and state. Highlighting outcomes allows religious and secular groups to collaborate without compromising anyone's beliefs or rights.

## Build Trust Through Transparency and Accountability

The survey also suggests that much of the distrust some Americans feel toward religious institutions stems from information gaps rather than outright hostility. Many people are simply not exposed to the work that faith groups do every day. When they learn religion's story, they modify their views accordingly.

Policymakers can address this by encouraging faith-based organizations that receive public funds to voluntarily share clear and simple reports about their work, such as:

- **People Served:** Families sheltered, meals provided, disaster victims assisted

- **Community Impact:** Homes rebuilt, foster children placed, addiction recovery participants supported
- **Fiscal Stewardship:** How grants and donations are used to deliver services

By proactively sharing these results, faith-based organizations can demonstrate that they are wise stewards of resources and trustworthy partners. Transparency builds public confidence and counters the misconception that religious groups are motivated solely by proselytizing or political gain. This is especially important as government funding flows through programs like the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

For Latter-day Saint communities, this principle aligns closely with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' long tradition of humanitarian service, self-reliance, and careful stewardship of resources. By modeling these values, faith-based organizations can strengthen their credibility and expand their reach.

## **Design Inclusive, Constitutionally Sound Programs**

Conservatives have long championed the idea that the state should support, not supplant, religious and community-based organizations. To maintain public trust and constitutional integrity, state and federal policies should be designed to protect individual liberty and avoid even the appearance of favoritism.

Key policy guidelines include:

1. **Non-discrimination:** Services must be available to all, regardless of belief or background.

2. **Voluntary participation:** No one should be required to engage in religious activities to receive help.
3. **Pluralistic engagement:** Governments should partner with a range of faith traditions and secular nonprofits to prevent favoritism and maintain fairness.

These guardrails not only comply with the First Amendment but also reflect the conservative principle that civil society, not government bureaucracy, is best equipped to solve many social challenges.

## **Strengthen Civic Life for a Changing America**

The survey findings also highlight a challenge: Many religiously unaffiliated Americans see the benefits of faith-based organizations but lack comparable secular institutions that foster service and belonging. Historically, religious congregations were the backbone of civic participation – coordinating volunteers, encouraging voting, and promoting charitable giving.

As religious affiliation declines, there is a risk of civic decline as well. Policymakers can address this by:

1. Providing modest support for secular volunteer centers and community service hubs
2. Encouraging partnerships between faith-based groups and secular organizations to meet shared goals
3. Strengthening programs like mentorship initiatives, foster care networks, and addiction

recovery services where faith-based and secular efforts can work side by side

*These efforts should complement, not replace, religious institutions.* In situations where religious organizations are meeting a need, government programs should simply stay out of the way. By investing in both faith-based and secular civic infrastructure, policymakers can help maintain the

health of American democracy without undermining religious freedom.

Pew Research Center's [2024 findings](#) confirm that *nones* are significantly less likely to vote, volunteer, or give to charity compared to religiously affiliated adults. Strengthening community networks is essential to closing this participation gap.

## Section 8: Future Research Directions

While this study represents a step forward in characterizing nones malleability in attitudes toward religion, it is important to recognize its limits of external validity. Because it was conducted as a single experimental study, caution is warranted when generalizing findings beyond this particular sample and timeframe. The results strongly suggest that information about religion's societal contributions can shift attitudes, even among skeptics, but [replication and extension](#) are essential to confirm these effects across different populations and contexts.

This research opens multiple new avenues for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to understand and address the complex dynamics between religion and the growing population of religiously unaffiliated Americans ("nones").

### Immediate Priorities

The most pressing question concerns the persistence of attitude change. In this study, 23% of nones shifted from viewing religion as "part of the problem" to "part of the solution" after exposure to factual information. This is a dramatic effect, but does it last?

Longitudinal research is needed to track these same individuals over time, measuring whether their new, more positive attitudes endure for days, weeks, or months, or whether they revert without reinforcement. In other areas of social psychology, attitude change [often decays](#) rapidly unless supported

by repeated exposure or meaningful personal experiences. Understanding the decay curve of these changes will be critical for designing real-world interventions.

Equally urgent is determining whether attitude change translates into behavior. A shift in perception is valuable, but the real-world implications depend on whether these new attitudes lead to concrete actions. Key questions include:

- Does viewing religion more positively increase willingness to partner with religious organizations?
- Does it boost support for faith-based initiatives at the policy level?
- Does it encourage civic activities traditionally organized by religious communities, such as volunteering, charitable giving, or voting?

This distinction between attitudes and behaviors is well-established in social science: People often express favorable opinions without acting on them, a phenomenon known as the [attitude-behavior gap](#). Measuring whether this gap narrows after interventions will be crucial for practical impact.

### Understanding the Mechanisms of Change

The survey also raises deeper questions about why information changes attitudes. Is the process

primarily cognitive, with individuals updating beliefs based on new, credible facts?

Or is it emotional, involving shifts in threat perception, increased empathy, or reduced polarization?

Research in persuasion suggests that both processes may be at work. Understanding these mechanisms can help refine interventions:

- If the effect is primarily cognitive, then clarity, evidence, and repetition of factual messages will be most effective.
- If the effect is emotional, approaches might include storytelling, empathy-building, and face-to-face engagement.

Identifying these pathways would allow practitioners to tailor communication strategies to different subgroups of nones, such as the ideologically committed versus the spiritually searching.

## Methodological Extensions

Future research should expand the scope of experimental design in several key ways:

### 1. Source Effects:

Would the same information have different impacts depending on who delivers it?

- Religious vs. secular messengers
- Academic experts vs. journalists
- Clergy vs. civic leaders

Perceptions of [source credibility](#) and bias often determine whether information is trusted and acted upon. Testing these effects could help identify

the most effective communicators for bridging religious-secular divides.

### 2. Narrative vs. Statistical Persuasion:

This study relied on factual, statistical information – e.g., “75% of FEMA disaster relief organizations are faith-based”. While effective, some research suggests that narrative storytelling can be more emotionally engaging.

For example, a personal account of a family helped by a religious shelter might evoke stronger empathy than statistics alone. Future experiments could compare these approaches to determine which resonates most with skeptical audiences.

### 3. Two-Sided Messaging:

Many nones are skeptical of religious institutions due to negative experiences or perceived harms. Would acknowledging both strengths and weaknesses – admitting failures while highlighting successes – increase credibility? Research on [two-sided messaging](#) suggests that balanced communication can build trust, though it also risks triggering defensive reactions. Carefully designed studies could test whether such transparency makes religious outreach more persuasive or less effective.

## Why This Matters

The experimental design used here moves religious research from description to suggesting causation. By exploring not only what people believe, but also what might change those beliefs, future studies can provide actionable insights for policymakers, religious leaders, and civic organizations.

Understanding how, why, and how long attitudes shift will help shape strategies for building stronger communities – religious and secular alike – while maintaining respect for diverse beliefs.

In doing so, future research can ensure that this groundbreaking first step becomes a foundation for lasting progress rather than a one-time finding.

# Section 9: Broader Societal Implications

The findings of this study reach far beyond the internal concerns of religious communities or the academic study of religion. They speak to fundamental questions about how Americans live together, serve one another, and make sense of their lives in an age of fragmentation. By showing that attitudes about religion can change – sometimes dramatically – when people are exposed to verifiable information about its contributions, this research challenges widely held assumptions about the future of faith and society.

## Challenging Dominant Narratives

Several dominant cultural narratives shape public discourse about religion in America. The data from this survey provide a corrective to each, suggesting that reality is more nuanced and hopeful than these narratives allow.

### ***The Inevitability Narrative***

The inevitability narrative frames religious change as a one-way street: Either toward inexorable secularization, as in many European countries, or toward inevitable revival, as some religious conservatives predict. Both views assume fixed trajectories that leave little room for human agency or institutional renewal. Yet the experimental evidence of attitude malleability undermines this determinism.

When 23% of nones shift toward more positive views of religion after a single exposure to factual

information, it suggests that religious change is not preordained but contingent and responsive. Institutional behavior, messaging strategies, and the lived witness of religious communities matter deeply. Decline is not fate, and revival is not automatic; both depend on choices made by individuals and institutions.

### ***The Polarization Narrative***

The polarization narrative portrays religious and secular Americans as locked in an irredeemable culture war, with little hope of mutual understanding. Yet the survey reveals significant common ground around tangible contributions to the common good.

When 63% of skeptical nones acknowledge the societal benefit from faith-based groups in providing emergency shelter services, it becomes clear that collaboration is possible even when deep theological disagreements persist. This finding suggests a path forward for building coalitions around shared goals such as disaster relief, foster care, and poverty alleviation. In an era of political division, these concrete acts of service can serve as bridges across ideological divides.

### ***The Disengagement Narrative***

The disengagement narrative interprets nones' lower rates of voting, volunteering, and charitable giving as a rejection of community involvement altogether. But the data tell a different story. Nones clearly value civic contributions – they recognize the positive role

of religious organizations in society – yet they lack the institutional structures that religious groups have historically provided.

Churches, synagogues, and other congregations have long functioned as hubs of social capital, coordinating volunteer efforts, mobilizing voters, and fostering mutual aid. As religious affiliation declines, secular society has struggled to build functional equivalents. This reframing – from a supposed values deficit to a structural challenge – changes the policy conversation. The question is not why nones care less, but how to create new civic frameworks that channel their values into action.

support. In the absence of these institutions, many individuals are left to navigate life's challenges alone or with limited social scaffolding. Material prosperity and individual freedom, while valuable, cannot substitute for a shared sense of purpose.

The survey reveals that there are unmet spiritual and communal needs for many and this reality in America creates an openness, even among those who have disaffiliated. This does not necessarily predict a return to traditional religious practice, but it does indicate a hunger for the kinds of meaning and community that religion has historically provided. Secular alternatives – like mindfulness apps, social

***“To say that one is ‘spiritual but not religious’ or ‘spiritual and religious’ is often a way of saying, ‘I am dissatisfied with the way things are, and I want to find a new way of connecting with God, my neighbor, and my own life.”***

—Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*

## **The Question of Meaning and Community**

Perhaps the most poignant finding of this survey is the existential gap experienced by many nones. While 56% report overall life satisfaction, fully 32% say there is “something important missing” in their lives. This substantial minority highlights a profound challenge for secular society: How do we meet fundamental human needs for meaning, belonging, and transcendence?

Historically, religion has been the primary provider of these resources. Congregations offered frameworks for understanding life, rituals for marking birth, marriage, and death, and communities of mutual

clubs, or online communities – offer partial solutions, but they often lack the depth, continuity, and intergenerational connection of religious traditions.

This finding has profound implications for policymakers, civic leaders, and faith communities alike. It suggests that efforts to address loneliness, social fragmentation, and declining civic trust must take seriously the role of spiritual and existential well-being, not just material needs.

## **Future Trajectories**

The evidence of attitude malleability points to several possible futures for American religion, each shaped

by the decisions of individuals, communities, and institutions:

### **1. Continued Secularization**

If religious institutions fail to address legitimate concerns about political entanglement, scandals, and exclusion, *nones* [could continue to grow](#) toward the projected 34–52% of the population by 2070. In this scenario, faith becomes increasingly marginal in public life, and secular organizations struggle to replace the civic functions once provided by religious groups.

### **2. Dynamic Equilibrium**

The current level of roughly 28–30% unaffiliated could persist, but with continuous population exchange – some individuals leaving religious institutions while others re-engage. This model reflects a fluid landscape where affiliation and disaffiliation balance each other, shaped by shifting cultural norms and institutional responses.

### **3. Partial Re-engagement**

Religious institutions that prioritize service over sermons and principles over prerogatives may win back some of the disaffiliated, especially the large “nothing in particular” subgroup and those who feel something is missing in their lives. This re-engagement would likely focus on practical acts of service and community rather than doctrinal disputes.

### **4. Hybrid Emergence**

New forms of meaning-making and community-building could arise that are neither traditionally religious nor fully secular. These hybrids might combine elements of ritual, service, and shared purpose while remaining open to diverse beliefs. Examples include interfaith service coalitions, secular “congregations,” or online networks that foster belonging without theology.

## **Implications for Civic Life**

Which trajectory prevails will profoundly affect American society. A future of continued secularization without adequate civic substitutes risks declining volunteerism, reduced charitable giving, and weakening social trust. A future of dynamic equilibrium or partial re-engagement could stabilize civic life by preserving many of religion’s social benefits, even amid theological diversity. And a hybrid future might create entirely new ways of organizing community in a fragmented age.

The choices made today – by religious leaders, policymakers, and everyday citizens – will determine which path the nation takes. By grounding these decisions in empirical evidence and a commitment to the common good, it is possible to build a society where both religious and secular institutions work together to meet the deepest needs of individuals and communities alike.

# Conclusion: Transforming Understanding of Religious Change

***“The Lord redeemed everyone with Christ’s blood, ‘everyone, not only Catholics. Everyone.’ And atheists? ‘They too. It is this blood that makes us children of God.’”***

—Pope Francis, [Homily at Casa Santa Marta, May 2013](#)

This survey represents more than an incremental advance in studying religious nones – it demonstrates a different approach to understanding religious change. By moving from descriptive documentation to experimental intervention, from asking “what do people believe?” to “what could change beliefs?”, it transforms our capacity to understand and potentially influence one of the most significant social transformations of our time.

The core finding – that roughly a quarter of nones (an average 23-point gain) move from viewing religion as “part of the problem” to “part of the solution” after factual exposure – is not just statistically notable but socially profound. It indicates that much of the religious-secular divide stems from misunderstanding rather than fixed hostility. The subgroup differences – a modest post-exposure endorsement among atheists and agnostics (35%) versus a majority among “nothing in particulars” (56%) – show that secularization is varied, not monolithic. These contrasts reveal practical pathways for engagement that descriptive research alone could not detect.

For religious communities, the survey offers both hope and guidance. The malleability of attitudes

among the majority of nones suggests possibilities for re-engagement, while specific response patterns – concrete service resonates, moral claims don’t – provide clear communication strategies. The identification of receptive subgroups like the “something missing” population enables targeted outreach.

For secular society, the findings highlight both challenges and opportunities. The civic engagement gap among nones threatens democratic participation and social capital, yet their acknowledgment of religious contributions suggests potential for collaborative solutions. The existential searching among nearly a third of nones indicates unmet needs that require institutional innovation.

For policymakers, the experimental evidence provides empirical grounding for navigating religious-secular tensions. The distinction between support for religious freedom principles and skepticism toward religious institutions enables nuanced approaches to church-state issues. The responsiveness to factual information suggests evidence-based policy communication could build broader coalitions.

As America faces an uncertain religious future, with *nones* potentially becoming a majority by 2070, understanding not just who they are but what might change their minds becomes essential. This survey provides both the methodological template and empirical foundation for that understanding. By demonstrating that even deeply held religious attitudes can shift with appropriate information, it opens new possibilities for building inclusive communities that honor both religious heritage and secular citizenship.

The innovation of experimental design in religious research reveals that the religious-secular divide, while real, is neither as fixed nor as fundamental as often assumed. When presented with facts over ideology, service over sermons, and principles over institutional prerogatives, even skeptics can recognize religion's contributions, and even believers can acknowledge secular concerns. In that mutual recognition lies the possibility for a future that transcends division while honoring diversity – a future this survey helps make possible.

Robert Putnam [has found](#) that “Regular church attendees reported talking with 40 percent more people in the course of the day... churchgoing itself “produces” social connectivity – probably the causal arrow between the two points in both directions – but it is clear that religious people are unusually active social capitalists.” It is exactly this social connectivity that religious communities foster represents precisely what many *nones* report missing.

As Diana Butler Bass [observes](#) in *Grounded: Finding God in the World A Spiritual Revolution*, “The spiritual revolution is a protest movement against forms of religion that have lost the binding vision of peace, wisdom, and equanimity here on earth.” Our survey suggests that by emphasizing tangible service and community benefits – the very social capital Putnam documents – religious institutions might bridge the divide with those seeking meaning outside traditional structures.

# Appendix: Complete Survey Data Tables

**Table A1: Complete Q204 Agreement Levels -  
Statements About Religion's Benefits**

*Full breakdown showing both strong agreement and total agreement*

Statement	Agree Very Much/Completely	Total Agree
Religious beliefs help people stay hopeful in hard times	51%	22%
Religion provides people with a sense of meaning in life	48%	23%
Religious practices like prayer help reduce stress and anxiety	45%	14%
Religious communities offer strong social support and belonging	43%	20%
Religious organizations play huge role in humanitarian relief	43%	15%
Religion helps instill sense of honesty and right/wrong	41%	16%
Religious teachings help guide moral decisions	40%	12%
People of faith are large source of volunteers and donations	38%	15%
People of faith motivated to work for social justice	35%	10%
Religious schools/universities contribute to education	32%	9%
Religious faith can discourage risky behaviors	30%	13%
Religious organizations encourage civic engagement	30%	10%
Religious people report better mental health	28%	8%
Being religious linked to better health outcomes	27%	7%
Religious people are happier in their lives	27%	8%

● Total      ● Nones

**Table A2: Complete Q205 Fact  
Acknowledgment - Benefits to Society**  
*Full breakdown of acknowledgment levels for factual information*

Factual Statement	Benefits Great Extent/Totally	Total Benefits
Faith-based organizations provide most emergency shelter	48%	30%
Religion contributes \$1.2 trillion to U.S. economy	46%	27%
75% of FEMA disaster organizations are faith-based	46%	27%
Americans who attend services more likely to volunteer	45%	22%
One in five hospital beds from religious organizations	41%	23%
Students at religious colleges pursue helping careers	41%	22%
Religious groups effective in foster care	39%	20%
Regular attendance linked to lower suicide risk	38%	18%
Young religious Americans report more belonging	38%	16%
Religious people give more to charity	37%	16%
Actively religious describe as “very happy”	35%	13%
Women attending with partners report greater happiness	35%	14%
Religious Americans less likely report depression	31%	12%
Majority immigrant/refugee support is faith-based	31%	18%
1 in 4 students in faith-based education	26%	10%

Total     
  Nones

**Table A3: Q208 Future Religious Interest Distribution**

Likelihood Score Range	% of Nones	Interpretation
0-10	44%	Very unlikely to develop interest
11-20	12%	Unlikely but not impossible
21-30	9%	Low possibility
31-40	5%	Some possibility
41-50	4%	Moderate possibility
51-60	7%	More likely than not
61-70	5%	Likely
71-80	4%	Very likely
81-90	3%	Highly likely
91-100	7%	Almost certain/certain
<b>Median</b>	<b>20.0</b>	
<b>Mean</b>	<b>30.8</b>	

**Table A4: Q209 Childhood Religious Importance - Detailed**

Level of Importance	% of Nones
Extremely important	7%
Very important	13%
Somewhat important	30%
Not very important	24%
Not at all important	27%

**Table A5: Life Satisfaction Statement & Response**

“Something important missing in my life”	% of Nones
Strongly agree	11%
Somewhat agree	21%
Neutral	27%
Somewhat disagree	16%
Strongly disagree	26%
“I am satisfied with my life”	% of Nones
Strongly agree	22%
Somewhat agree	34%
Neutral	21%
Somewhat disagree	15%
Strongly disagree	7%



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