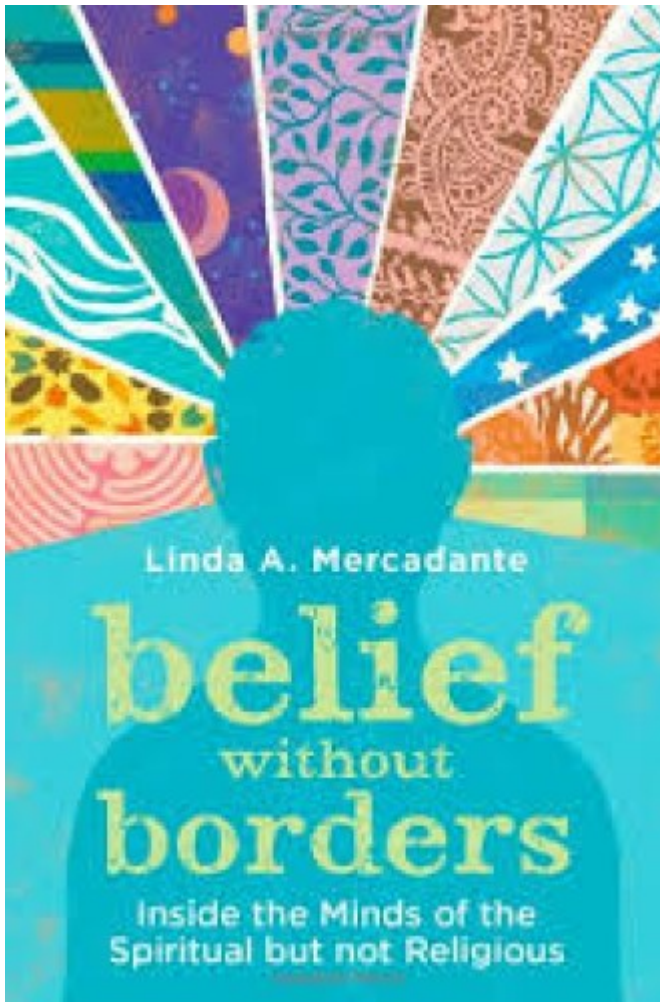


*Belief without Borders*, by Linda A. Mercadante

reviewed by [Timothy Mark Renick](#) in the [April 30, 2014](#) issue

## In Review



### **Belief without Borders**

By Linda A. Mercadante  
Oxford University Press

The most striking current trend in American religions may also be the least understood. Between 1990 and 2010, the number of Americans who claimed to have no religious affiliation more than tripled, from 14 million to 46 million. This makes

the so-called nones—individuals who respond to questions about their religious affiliations with “none”—the fastest growing “religious” group in the United States, far outpacing the increase in Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims. It also means that there are now more Americans with no religious affiliation than there are mainline American Protestants.

Even these startling statistics may underrepresent the extent of the phenomenon. Young adults are three times more likely to be religiously unaffiliated than are older Americans, suggesting that the trend has far from peaked. Meanwhile, studies point to a parallel increase in “churn”: movement between two or more religious affiliations in a lifetime. As Linda Mercadante writes in *Belief without Borders*: “From whatever angle you look, it can’t be denied that growing numbers of Americans have ceased identifying with, contributing to, or remaining devoted to any particular religious tradition or faith community.”

Given its unprecedented nature and potential social significance, this exponential growth in the number of religiously unaffiliated Americans has received surprisingly little serious examination by scholars and journalists. Popular characterizations of nones tend to fall into two broad and simplistic categories. Some commentators assume that these individuals are atheists and moral relativists—individuals who have rejected not only organized religion but all greater truths. Others bundle the nones into the category of new-age dilettantes or, as one critic puts it, “commitment phobic, overly self-focused . . . salad-bar spiritualists.”

In *Belief without Borders*, Mercadante suggests that the vast majority of religiously unaffiliated Americans are not any of these things. A professor of theology at Methodist Theological School in Ohio, Mercadante has studied the phenomenon nationally and has conducted in-depth interviews with more than 80 self-professed nones. What she reveals about their beliefs is at odds with many popular characterizations and has much to tell us about the state of religion in America.

In some ways Mercadante’s work builds upon the observations of the Princeton sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow, who has posited that the increase in the number of young Americans who have turned away from organized religion is not necessarily an indication of a turn toward a more secular America. He highlights the increase in the number of spiritual options available to young people today and concludes that we have become a nation of seekers of spiritual experiences rather than dwellers in one religious home. Those who are “spiritual but not religious” may

not identify with any one church, temple, or mosque, but they also are far from being atheists (at least in the way that term is typically understood).

Mercadante's work brings remarkable nuance to Wuthnow's observations—and adds some surprises as well. She finds, for instance, that the typical none is neither a theological novice nor a moral relativist. In fact, she argues, the very reason that many nones reject traditional religious affiliations is that they are theologically sophisticated and have a strong commitment to moral principles. Mercadante writes, "What bothered most interviewees more than simplistic depictions of heaven and hell was the seeming unfairness and exclusivism of it. They rejected the idea that only those from your own religion are rewarded with heaven." One interviewee said simply: "All those millions of people in China were going to hell because they didn't know Jesus. I could never figure that one out."

Other nones said they had parted with traditional religion because of its support of a patriarchal God—"the difficult-to-satisfy father, or the capricious king who could just as well smite you as help you." A number of interviewees found the interventionist God who answers prayers and works physical miracles to be the problem: "I don't think [God is] pulling for us or rooting for us. . . . I think that's a childlike vision of reality." Mercadante notes a recurring theme here: for most nones, their rejection of organized religion did not equate to a rejection of God but rather provided a context for a principled reimagining of God. In short, many nones are still theists. As one interviewee put it: "It's a very personal relationship I have with God. . . . I don't have a vision of God being a kindly old man sitting on a throne some place."

Some nones reject traditional religion because of its tensions with modern notions of science. One interviewee recalls a ninth-grade Sunday school teacher trying to explain the book of Revelation to the class: She "talked about the city with the gates and she was literally trying to draw this on a chalkboard. . . . I was mortified."

For the most part, even those interviewees who could not be labeled theists were far from being nihilists. These nones harkened back to the original, literal meaning of the word *atheism*: a belief in something other than theism. One interviewee described her spiritual journey as a move from belief in "the Wizard of Oz running the show" to the embrace of a "metaphysical non-embodied entity beyond definition." Another said, "We're part of this collective oneness. There's not [a] conscious being that's separate from us. . . . There is this intelligence that you can get within your own brain." In short, nones may be religiously unaffiliated, but with

few exceptions they are not nonbelievers.

Mercadante's study thus offers a contrast to the work of those commentators who too easily suggest that the rise of the religiously unaffiliated is tantamount to the secularization of America: "Some may think that in a postmodern era that is fragmented and shorn of meta-narratives, theology is not being done. But even in this context, people try to make sense of their lives, to find some compelling reason to get up each day, endure difficulties, find joy, and live with hope." She even posits that a new theology may be emerging from nones.

What such a phenomenon means for American religion and American society as a whole, though, remains unclear. For centuries, organized religion has provided individuals not only with a sense of community and belonging, but with emotional, financial, and spiritual support during times of crisis. Organized religion has helped define the human life cycle by communal markers: welcoming new births, sanctioning marriages, recognizing deaths. In contrast, Mercadante writes, "What distinguishes these interviewees is their firm belief in the rightness—even righteousness—of this lack of loyalty to any particular spiritual group." The question is not merely what will mainline American churches look like if these trends continue, but what will become the nature and shape of American society?

*Belief without Borders* makes two things very clear. The increase in the number of religiously unaffiliated Americans shows no signs of abating, and we all need to start paying attention to this phenomenon.