

Religious nones may not be who you think they are

by [Cathy Lynn Grossman](#) in the [April 16, 2014](#) issue

In recent surveys, the religious nones—as in “none of the above”—appear to lead in the faith marketplace. In fact, none could soon be the dominant label that U.S. adults pick when asked to describe their religious identity.

But they may not be who you think they are. Today, nones include many more unbranded believers than atheists, and they show an increasingly diverse racial and ethnic mix.

Researchers say this is already making nones’ attitudes and opinions less predictably liberal on social issues.

A survey of Americans by the Public Religion Research Institute found 21 percent are “unaffiliated” (PRRI’s umbrella term for a diverse group including atheists, seculars, and people who say they still believe in God); 20 percent are Catholic; and 19 percent are white evangelical.

“Nones are dancing on the razor’s edge of leading,” said Robert P. Jones, CEO of PRRI.

Meanwhile, the Pew Research Center’s cumulative findings, based on 16,000 interviews in numerous 2013 surveys, found a slightly different split: 22 percent Catholic; 20 percent nones (a mix of people who say they believe “nothing in particular,” unaffiliated believers, and unbelievers); and 18 percent white evangelicals.

However, both Jones and Greg Smith, director of U.S. religion surveys for Pew, caution that this is really a statistical three-way tie for both research firms once the critical margin of error for each survey is considered.

Meanwhile, all the subcategories of Protestants—white and black evangelicals, plus the mainline faithful—still add up to a plurality (48 percent), although each has

“distinctive social and political beliefs, attitudes, and opinions,” said Smith.

“The nones are clearly growing as a share of the population. It’s a big, important, fundamental change in U.S. society, regardless of what’s causing it and whatever else is happening,” Smith said. “But does it necessarily mean that other religious groups are less healthy than they might have been? It may be that they are, but there are other forces that are in play.”

Those forces include immigration rates and religious switching. About half of Americans switch their religion, leave one, or find one at least once in their lifetime.

Today’s young adults are starting out more unaffiliated than any prior generation. So even if some millennials do find a faith, Jones said, “they will still be the most unaffiliated generation in history.”

Jones identified another force in shifting religious demography: “There are fewer white evangelicals among millennials [age 18 to 33] because younger Americans today are more racially and ethnically diverse.”

A PRRI survey found that second- and third-generation Hispanics are less likely to be Catholic than their parents or grandparents. Some move to evangelical, charismatic, and politically conservative Protestant groups, but equal numbers are simply becoming unaffiliated, said Jones. —RNS

This article was edited March 31, 2014.