

By the Numbers: Nonbelief in the U.S.

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November 12, 2017

Overview

- This presentation is based mostly upon data from the Pew Research Center.
- My perspective is that of a Humanist and Atheist.
Order of topics:
- --The bad news.
- --The good news, the positive data and trends.
- --What can we do as modern, enlightened humanists and atheists to further the very real progress that Pew Research has documented?

Why Pew Research?

- Very large samples: 35,000+.
- (plus smaller surveys of 5,000+ which still qualify as large sample surveys)
- Same surveys repeated over time (2007 & 2014; 2012 and 2017).
- Objectivity, impartiality—the best available.
- A range of subtle and well-worded questions designed to get at the TRUE levels of religious belief and practice, and the ACTUAL extent of nonbelief in the U.S.

The Most Important Weakness

- The biggest problem with the Pew Research surveys is that the main question is biased in favor of getting a response of a particular religious affiliation.
- This question is asked over the phone:
- “What is your present religion, if any? Are you Protestant, Roman Catholic, Mormon, Orthodox such as Greek or Russian Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, atheist, agnostic, something else, or nothing in particular?”
- This question could give the respondent the impression that the interviewer is expecting a response of a specific religion, such as Protestant or Catholic. The non-theist options at the end of the question seem like an afterthought.

The Bad News

- In response to the previous question, in 2014 only 7% of the U.S. adult population age 18 or older selected “atheist” or “agnostic:”
 - Atheist: 3.1%
 - Agnostic: 4.0%
 - “Nothing in particular:” 15.8%
 - **Total “Unaffiliated” above: 22.8%**
- “Something else:”
 - Humanist: <0.3%

The “Unaffiliated”

- In answer to the question, “What is your present religion, if any?” in 2014 15.8% said “nothing in particular.”
- Pew uses the term “Unaffiliated” to refer to the 3.1% atheists + the 4.0% agnostics + the 15.8% “nothing in particular” group.
- This unaffiliated category was 23% of U.S. adults in 2014 and has been rapidly increasing.

The “Nothing in particular” respondents

- On the positive side, this part of the adult population is not involved in the harmful side of organized religions in the U.S.
- But are they nonreligious? Are they secular?
- A heterogeneous group. In 2014 of the “nothing in particular” group, 8.8% of U.S. adults said religion is “not too” or “not at all” important in their lives, while 6.9% of adults said religion is “very” or “somewhat” important. Members of the latter group are not secular or nonreligious.

Nonbelievers

- So, as of 2014, the total of nonbelievers in the U.S. might be the self-described Atheists, Agnostics, and Humanists, plus the “Nothing in particular” respondents for whom religion is not important:
- $3.1\% + 4.0\% + ,<0.3\%, + 8.8\% =$
- About 16.2% of the U.S. adult population

Other Bad News

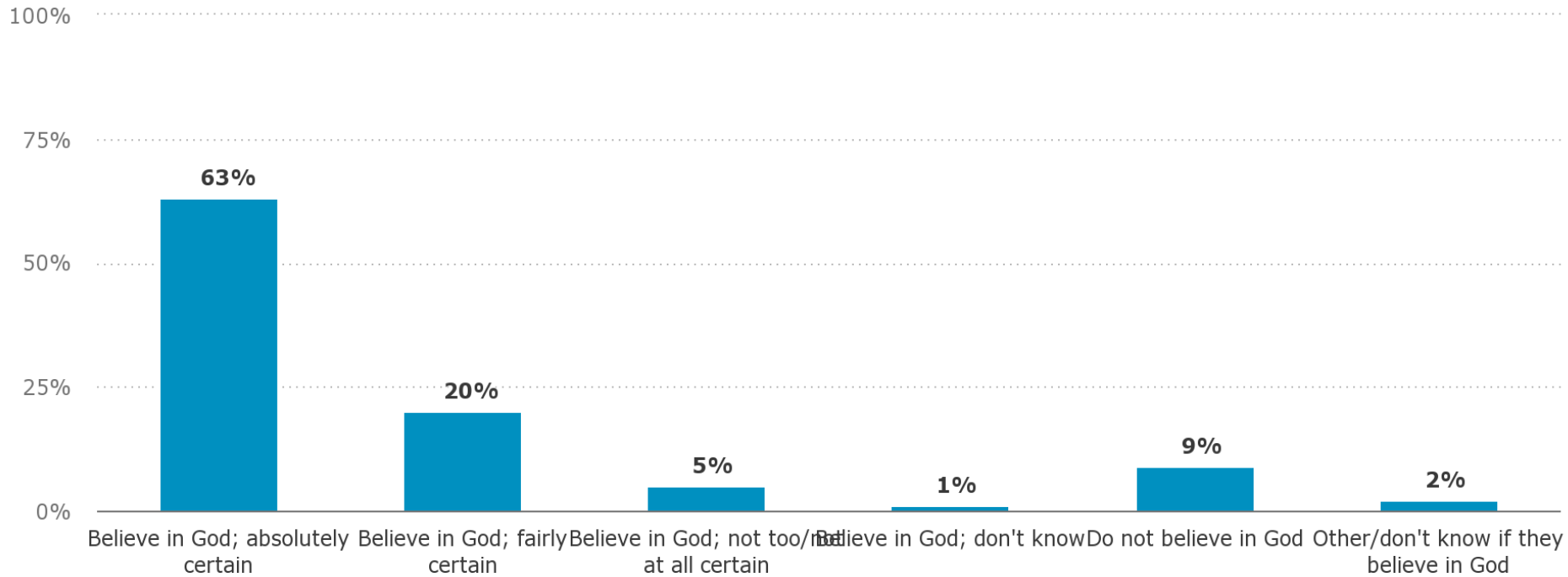
- The 2014 survey asked respondents:
- “Do you believe in God or a universal spirit?” [Yes or No or other, don’t know.]
- [Note: This is a broad, expansive definition of God, and would be expected to elicit a high “Yes” response. The idea of a “universal spirit” is vague, somewhat new age, undefined, and all-encompassing.]

Belief in God or universal spirit

- Responses in 2014 with level of certainty.

Belief in God

% of adults who say they...



God-belief Bad News

- As of 2014, 89% of U.S. adults responded Yes, they believe in God or a universal spirit. Even among the Unaffiliated in 2014, 61% are believers by this definition.
- In addition, of all U.S. adults, 55% pray daily, 53% say religion is very important to them, and 50% attend religious services at least monthly (2014 data).

Bad News Conclusions

- So, by 2014, only about 16% of U.S. adults were likely nonbelievers, based on Pew data.
- At the same time, only 9% of U.S. adults clearly responded that they do not believe in God or a universal spirit. 2% didn't know.

Who responded “No”?

- Only 33% of the Unaffiliated said No, they do not believe in God or a universal spirit. Another 6% of Unaffiliated said “Don’t know.”
- Others who answered No:
 - 27% of Buddhists, + 4% “Don’t know.”
 - 17% of those who said they were Jewish, and 4% of Jews said “Don’t know.”
 - 10% of Hindus
 - 2% of Mainline Protestants
 - 2% of Catholics

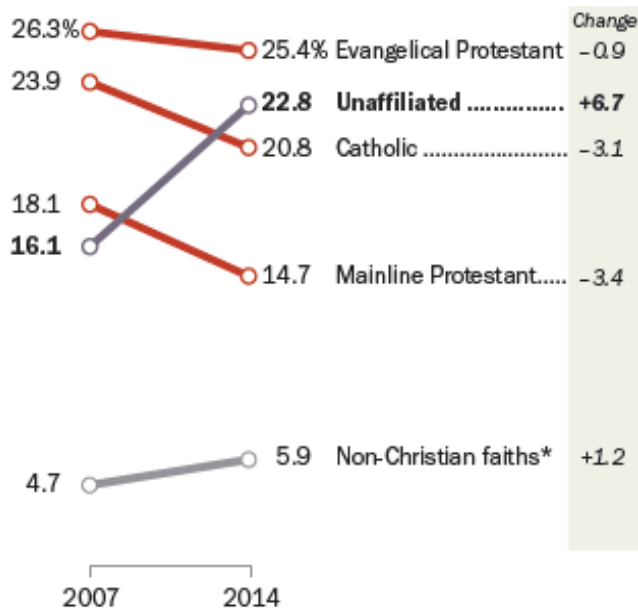
The Good News

- Trends are good.
- Between 2007 and 2014, based on comparable Pew surveys, there was a sharp increase in the Unaffiliated population.

Increasing proportion of U.S. adults are “Unaffiliated,” which includes “Nothing in particular,” Atheist, and Agnostic.

Changing U.S. Religious Landscape

Between 2007 and 2014, the Christian share of the population fell from 78.4% to 70.6%, driven mainly by declines among mainline Protestants and Catholics. The unaffiliated experienced the most growth, and the share of Americans who belong to non-Christian faiths also increased.



* Includes Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, other world religions and other faiths. Those who did not answer the religious identity question, as well as groups whose share of the population did not change significantly, including the historically black Protestant tradition, Mormons and others, are not shown.

Source: 2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014

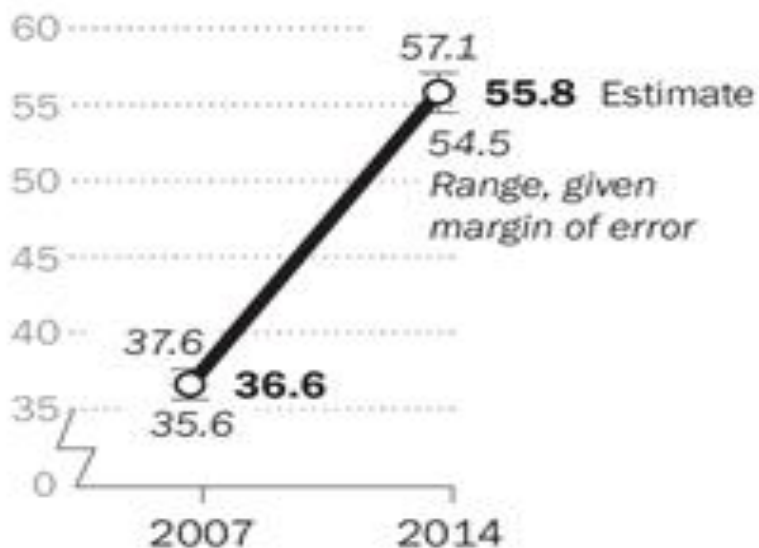
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Unaffiliated Americans Estimate

- 2007-2014

Rapid Growth of Religiously Unaffiliated

Adults, in millions



Source: 2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014

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Gradual Progress 2007 to 2014

Composition of the Religious “Nones”

	<i>Among all U.S. adults</i>			<i>Among the religiously unaffiliated</i>		
	2007	2014	Change	2007	2014	Change
	%	%		%	%	
Atheist/agnostic	4.0	7.0	+3.0	25	31	+6
Atheist	1.6	3.1	+1.5	10	13	+3
Agnostic	2.4	4.0	+1.6	15	17	+2
Nothing in particular	12.1	15.8	+3.7	75	69	-6
Religion not important ¹	6.3	8.8	+2.5	39	39	0
Religion important ¹	<u>5.8</u>	<u>6.9</u>	<u>+1.1</u>	<u>36</u>	<u>30</u>	-6
NET Unaffiliated	16.1	22.8	+6.7	100	100	

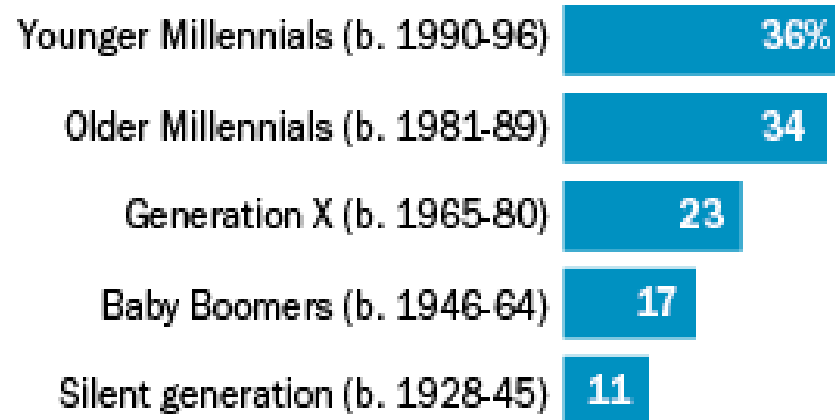
2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014. Figures may not add to totals indicated due to rounding.

¹Those who describe their religion as “nothing in particular” are subdivided into two groups. The “religion not important” group includes those who say (in Q.F2) religion is “not too” or “not at all” important in their lives as well as those who decline to answer the question about religion’s importance. The “religion important” category includes those who say religion is “very” or “somewhat” important in their lives.

Generational Change!

Younger Americans More Likely to be Unaffiliated

% of each generation who identify their religion as atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular



Source: 2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014.

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Declining “religiosity”

- Pew measures levels of “religiosity,” also called “religious commitment,” a composite measure comprised of self-reported rates of attendance at worship services, daily prayer, certainty of belief in God, and self-described importance of religion in people’s lives.
- The proportion of adults with “low” religiosity is rising.

Trend toward low religiosity

Growing number of U.S. adults have low level of religious commitment

% of each generation whose religious commitment is ...

<i>Among all U.S. adults</i>	2007	2014	Change
High religious commitment	60	55	-5
Medium	27	26	-1
Low	<u>14</u>	<u>19</u>	+5
	100	100	
<hr/>			
<i>Silent generation and older</i>			
High religious commitment	71	68	-3
Medium	19	20	+1
Low	<u>10</u>	<u>12</u>	+2
	100	100	
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<i>Boomer</i>			
High religious commitment	61	61	0
Medium	27	25	-2
Low	<u>13</u>	<u>15</u>	+2
	100	100	
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<i>Gen X</i>			
High religious commitment	56	55	-1
Medium	29	26	-3
Low	<u>15</u>	<u>19</u>	+4
	100	100	
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<i>Millennial</i>			
High religious commitment	50	43	-7
Medium	31	29	-2
Low	<u>19</u>	<u>29</u>	+10
	100	100	

Note: The religious commitment scale is created by combining four individual measures of religious observance — self-assessment of religion's importance in one's life, religious attendance, frequency of prayer and belief in God. For details on the scale, see <http://pewrsr.ch/24wScqE>.

Source: 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014.

Religious or not?

- Newest data: During April-June 2017, Pew conducted a U.S. telephone survey of 5,000+ respondents. Similar 2012 survey.
- The survey asked: “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a religious person, or not?”
- Yes: Of U.S. adults, 65% in 2012, declined to 54% in 2017—a sharp drop in only 5 years.

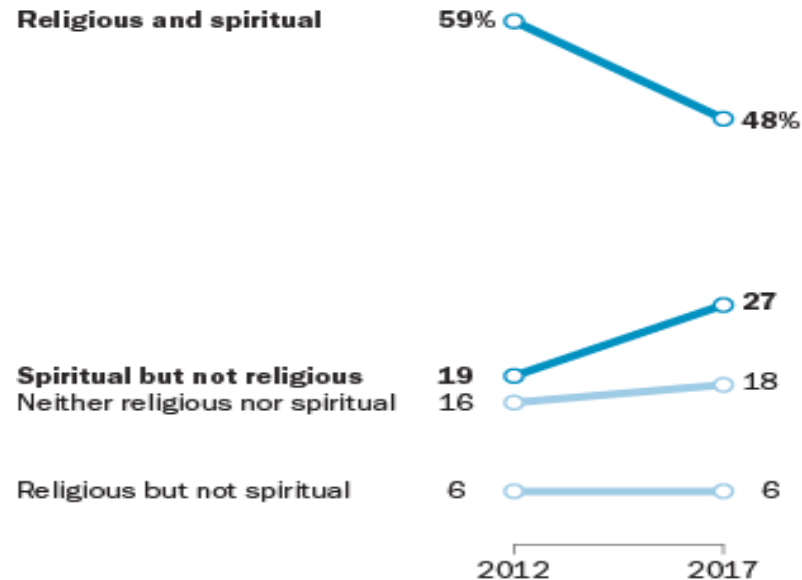
Spiritual or not?

- Same surveys:
- “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a spiritual person, or not?”
- Yes: Of U.S. adults, 78% in 2012, and 75% in 2017.
- In both years, more U.S. respondents thought of themselves as “spiritual” than “religious.”

Spiritual and/or Religious or Neither

A quarter of Americans now see themselves as spiritual but not religious

% who identify as ...



Note: Respondents were asked separate questions about whether they consider themselves to be “a religious person” and whether they consider themselves to be “a spiritual person.” The “spiritual but not religious” category includes those who responded affirmatively to the question about being a spiritual person and also responded that they do not consider themselves to be a religious person. Statistically significant changes are indicated in **bold**. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Survey conducted April 25-June 4, 2017.

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Trends 2012-2017

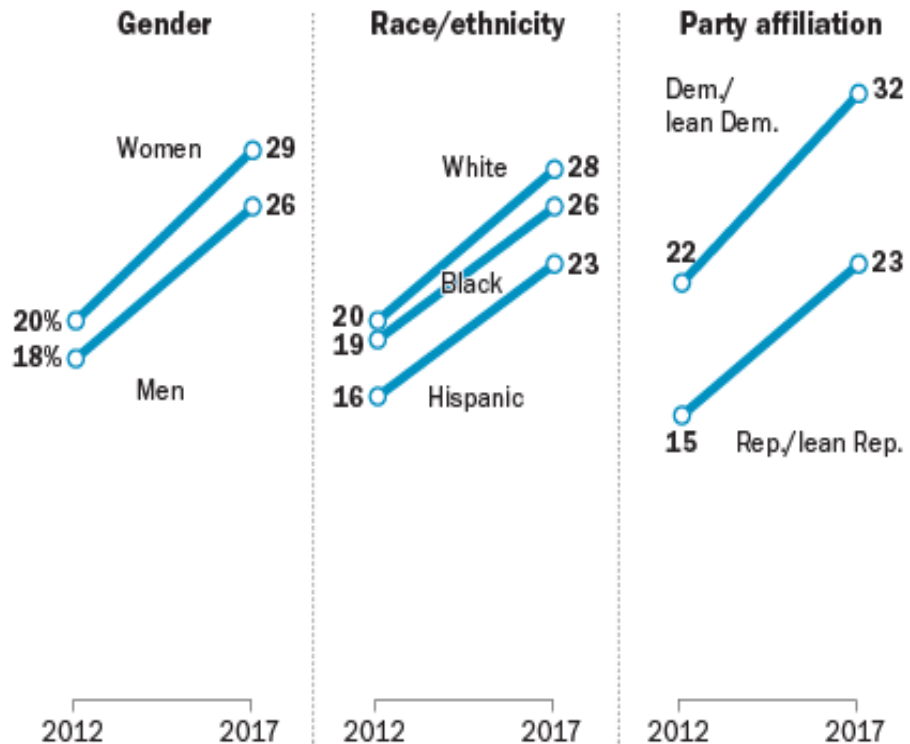
- Those who think of themselves as neither religious nor spiritual rose from 16% of U.S. adults in 2012 to 18% in 2017.
- We could see this group as the core nonbelievers. From my personal perspective, I also see this category as that portion of the U.S. population who are non-superstitious and tend to be more clear-thinking.

“Spiritual but not Religious”

- The Pew Research team emphasizes the importance of the rise in this group.
- It may signal a shift away from strong religious identity toward a more amorphous “spiritual” identity, whatever that means.
- In the Pew surveys, respondents are self-defining what they mean by “religious” and by “spiritual.”

Increase of 'spiritual but not religious' is broad-based

% of U.S. adults who identify as spiritual but not religious



Note: Respondents were asked separate questions about whether they consider themselves to be "a religious person" and whether they consider themselves to be "a spiritual person." The "spiritual but not religious" category includes those who responded affirmatively to the question about being a spiritual person and also responded that they do not consider themselves to be a religious person. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic. Hispanics can be of any race. Source: Survey conducted April 25-June 4, 2017.

Alan Cooperman, Pew Research Center



Recent data on atheism in the U.S.

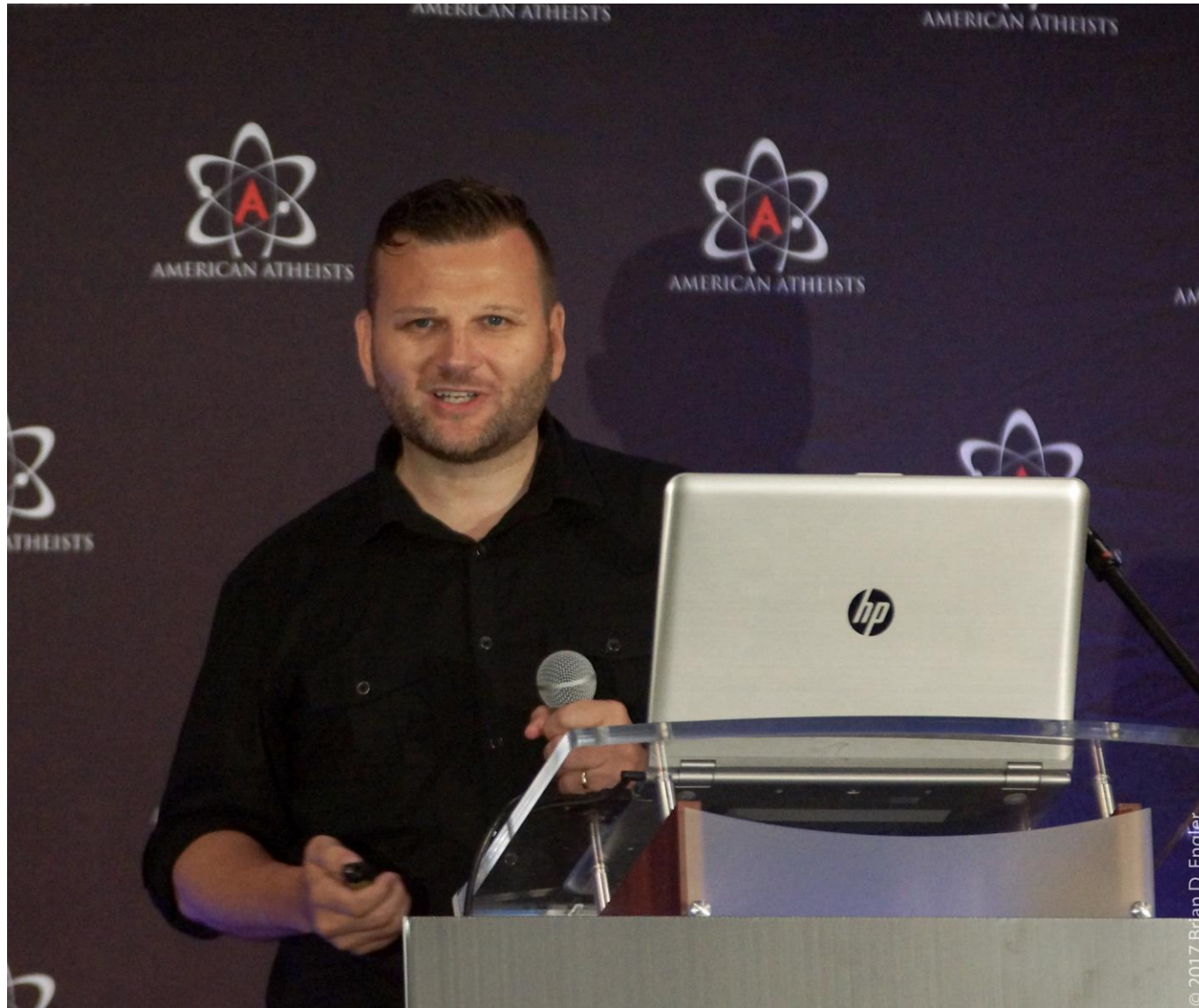
- Alan Cooperman leads the surveys on religious belief and identity in the U.S.
- In answer to the question, “What is your present religion, if any?”, of U.S. adults age 18 and older, in 2007 1.6% said atheist, and in 2014, 3.1%. Atheists are 2% of Boomers and 5% of Millennials.
- Agnostics increased from 2.4% to 4.0%.

Identify with a religion, but really secular?

- In the U.S., some adults say they are Protestant or Catholic or Jewish or Buddhist, when they are actually nonbelievers.
- Some are overt about their atheism, such as some reformed Jews who want to hold on to the cultural aspects of Judaism but not the superstition.
- Mark Gura, Vice President of the Atheist Alliance of America, wrote a book on *Atheist Meditation* *Atheist Spirituality*, and spoke to the American Atheist Convention about secular Buddhism.

Mark Gura

The Atheist Reformation of Buddhism



What Is Secular Buddhism?

1. **Traditional Buddhism:** MINUS the god(s), gurus, pseudoscience and supernaturalism.
2. It utilizes **ONLY** beliefs and practices that are consistent with and corroborated by reason and science.
3. **Secular Buddhist practice** differs for each person it is either:
 - A. **Buddhist-based** meditation techniques, and/or
 - B. **A set of secular, philosophical principles and instructions regarding meditation, and/or**
 - C. **A set of ethics.**

How many U.S. nonbelievers?

- Lowest estimate—as of 2014, the 9% of U.S. adults who answered No to the question: “Do you believe in God or a universal spirit?”
- Higher estimate—as of 2014, those who reported that they are atheists, agnostics, humanists, and the “nothing in particular” group who also said that religion is not important to them: 16.2% of U.S. adults.

Higher estimate of nonbelievers

- We could add to the foregoing 16.2% the respondents who identified with a specific religion but also said No, they do not believe in god or a universal spirit: An additional 1.5% of adults, totaling 17.7% of U.S. adults in 2014.
- Higher estimate: As of 2017, the 18% of U.S. adults who are neither spiritual nor religious.
- Highest estimate: in 2014, 19% of U.S. adults had low religiosity, low levels of religious commitment.

The Hard-core religious in 2014-2017

- Lowest estimate: The 54% of U.S. adults who think of themselves as religious in 2017.
- 2014: The 55% of U.S. adults with high religious commitment.
- Higher estimate: the 63% of U.S. adults in 2014 who were absolutely certain that there is a God or universal spirit.

In the middle or transitional

- The 27% of U.S. adults who see themselves as spiritual but not religious in 2017.
- The most positive picture of nonbelievers and believers in the U.S. today is:
 - 18-19% nonbelievers
 - 27% in the middle or transitional
 - 54-55% religious believers

Conclusions

- We Humanists and Atheists should not use the Pew Research category of “Unaffiliated” (22.8% of U.S. adults) as our estimate of nonbelievers in the U.S. It is too high because it includes the 6.9% of adults for whom religion is very or somewhat important even though they responded “nothing in particular” to the religious identity question.
- Let us not be guilty of the same self-deception that religious people engage in as they cling to superstitious beliefs for which there is no objective or scientific evidence.

Conclusions

- It is discouraging that the extent of nonbelief in the U.S. today is still so low, only 9-19% of adults.
- Equally discouraging is the excess power of organized churches in our communities and our government.
- But on the positive side, the shifts toward low religiosity and more secularism now underway are surprisingly rapid.

What can Humanists & Atheists do?

- Keep up the great work we are already doing. It is working well! In the decade 2007-2017, religious beliefs and religiosity have declined markedly in the U.S.
- Why is that? Primarily because of the spectacular and visible work of the American Humanist Association, American Atheists, the Freedom from Religion Foundation, the Secular Coalition for America, the Dawkins Foundation/Center for Inquiry, and all the other nationwide and state level secular organizations.

What has been most effective?

- 1) Humanists and atheists proudly and frequently going public on national media.
- 2) The billboard campaigns of AHA, American Atheists, and FFRF.
- 3) The effective legal work done by those three organizations in particular.
- 4) The political work done by our secular organizations in Washington, D.C., and in state capitals.

What can Humanists & Atheists do?

- Even as one individual, each of us can be a powerful force for human progress toward greater enlightenment and stronger humanist and atheist values in the U.S.
- Become a member of the strong national secular organizations—even a life member if you can afford it.
- Target financial contributions to the billboard campaigns or the high-profile legal work or the political work of those organizations.

What can Humanists & Atheists do?

- Demonstrate that we are working alongside others for important positive outcomes, right here locally all the way up to the national stage.
- Engage with those who say they are spiritual and they are not religious. Many of these may be transitioning out of religion toward atheism and humanism.
- Fight alongside other right-minded citizens to get reactionary religion out of our government and our laws.

What can Humanists & Atheists do?

- Give strong support to secular youth and young adults who are already leaving religion. How?
- We could partner with the Secular Student Alliance to give encouragement and a small bit of financial assistance to the launching and continuity of their chapters in local universities, colleges, trade schools, high schools and even middle schools.
- We could do better at publicizing humanism & atheism in media of interest to the young—blogs, webcasts, YouTube, other social media.
- We could occasionally partner with the Sunday Assemblies; they attract a young audience.
- We could invite more young speakers and widely publicize their talks to young audience media.

What can Humanists & Atheists do?

- Last but not least, we Humanists and Atheists can strengthen our alliances and joint efforts (with Freethinkers, Sunday Assemblies, Secular groups, Skeptic groups, other Atheist and Humanist groups) in the entire San Francisco/San Jose Bay Area and in Sacramento/Central Valley.
- So far we are not doing a good job on these relationships, which have great potential.
- Let us get our act together with our natural allies!

Silicon Valley Atheists and Humanists



Sources and Credits

- I would like to especially thank the Pew Research Center for designing and conducting their superb surveys in 2007, 2012, 2014, and 2017.
- And I thank Pew Research for their written permission to use any chart, graph, or table from their websites.
- I would like to thank Deborah Allen and Brian D. Engler for permission to use their photos from the 2017 American Atheist Convention.

Sources

- Tables and charts in this presentation can be found under “Religion” on the websites www.pewresearch.org and www.pewforum.org.
- Main source: America’s Changing Religious Landscape, 2015.
- Complete report pdf under:
- www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape

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