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# Generation atheist! Millennials to religion — get out of politics

**Millennials are much less attached to religion than their elders -- the politicization of the church might be why**

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*Reprinted from "[Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down Across Generations](#)"*

## **The Changing Demography of Nonbelief**

In American society today more than 93% of adults say they believe in God or a higher power, and about 38% say they attend religious services weekly. Among the world's advanced industrialized countries, the United States is the most religious in terms of belief in God and in organized religious participation. Compared to the 7% in the United States who are nonbelievers, 22% of Canadians do not believe in God, 39% of those in Great Britain, 56% of the French, and 56% of Swedes. At the same time, public opinion polls show that religious involvement such as church membership has declined

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considerably since the 1970s and is significantly lower than its zenith in the post–World War II period. The number of adults who never attend religious services or attend less than once a year increased from 18% in 1972 to 28% in 2008.

More noteworthy, the proportion of the adult population that reports no affiliation with a particular religion has increased dramatically in the past two decades, nearly tripling from 6% nationwide in 1990 to 20% in 2012. These changes are much greater in younger age groups. Millennials today are significantly less attached to organized religion than their elders were in their youth. In 2012 almost one-third of young adults ages eighteen to twenty-nine were unaffiliated with a religious institution, while in the 1970s only 13% of young adult Baby Boomers were unaffiliated. Young men are much more likely to be unaffiliated than young women.

These trends are occurring in a society in which there has been, and still is, a stigma attached to being nonreligious. It turns out that atheists are one of the most disliked groups in America. In a poll asking which of the following groups “shares my vision of American society,” out of a list that included Muslims, homosexuals, Jews, Hispanics, and immigrants, atheists were in last place. Asked if they would disapprove of their child’s marrying someone from a list of minority groups, atheists again were last.

Why have the nonaffiliated in younger age groups increased so substantially? One factor has to do with demographic changes: Today’s young adults marry and have children later than their predecessors and also enter the workforce later, extending the life cycle phase (the college years) when religious attachment tends to wane. Increased rates of higher education may be another factor. A Harris Poll reported that 86% of Americans without a college education believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, while only 64% of those with a postgraduate degree believe so.

A third explanation for the rise of Americans claiming no religion is the increasing politicization of religion. Michael Hout and Claude Fischer argue that the political right has become so identified with a conservative religious agenda that it has alienated moderates who consider organized “religion” a synonym for an antigay, antiabortion, procivic religion agenda. At the same time, while they may feel disenfranchised from organized religion, many of them remain privately religious or “spiritual.”<sup>18</sup> This reaction against the politicization of religion is seen particularly among young adults.

A fourth important factor, one that has not before been pursued in detail, involves intergenerational transmission: the increase in the number of religiously nonaffiliated parents who raised their children without a religious tradition. National data show that the number of adults raised without a religion increased from 2.5% in the early 1970s to over 6% in the 1990s.<sup>19</sup> However, these and similar results are based on cross-sectional survey data and respondents’ retrospective reports and are open to the risk of recall bias. The most convincing test of non-religious transmission would be based on data from parents and data from children.

### **The Adamses: “A Humanistic Point of View that Comes from My Family”**

In some cases we found that a non-religious identity had been imparted intentionally and specifically from one generation to the next. Gina Adams, thirty-six, is an atheist, but she is not a religious rebel who turned against the religious beliefs and practices of her family. Instead, she perceives that she is part of a family tradition, a generational heritage of secular humanism and nonreligious values. “I put a lot of value on a liberal, humanistic point of view—not dogmatic—and I think that comes from my family,” she explains.

The Adams family exemplifies the varieties of nonreligion in our society. Some members are atheists, some are agnostic, some are “spiritual but not religious,” and some are “religiously unaffiliated” Christian believers who do not go to church. We also noticed considerable fluidity among these categories of nonreligion by some family members as their religious self-identities shifted to accommodate new experiences or relationships. Many drifted in and out of organized religious involvement as they moved from one church to another or away from religion all together. Yet at the time of their interviews, all the family members were quite articulate about what they believed. They talked about values being passed down from generation to generation, and we detected continuity in spiritual values and behaviors despite their apparent disparity in religious beliefs and practices.

We begin with the story of the G1 [Generation 1] great-grandfather, Ted, a labor union leader who moved his family to California during the Depression. Describing his father as a nominal Catholic in his youth, Ted’s G2 [Generation 2] son Victor, now age seventy-eight, said he was a Social Democrat. “We would call him a socialist today. But they believed in a great measure of private freedom—you know, like freedom of the press and so on. As a result of that heritage, he really denied the existence of the need for a church.” Victor did attend church regularly with his mother, and his father did not stand in the way of that.

Victor sees his mother as having been the most influential in terms of his religious views. But when asked whether his father's values of helping others had anything to do with his own social activism, he responded,

Oh, absolutely. But it wasn't so much that as it was my [religious] training. But my father was a great humanitarian. Forget the religion. But anybody around who needed—and this is during the Depression, when nobody had anything. . . . He would find a family. We'd bring them some groceries—as little as we had. So, I learned a lot from that. I'll never forget that day we brought some groceries to this lady's house with a little kid. And they just cried....And so, in addition to the church going, I grew up with the kind of idea that [if] you've got it made, you need to give back.

This tradition of helping is woven throughout the stories of each generation of G1 Ted's descendants. Today, Victor is not a church member, so he would be defined as a none although he is not antireligious. During his interview, he mentioned several religious books that he is currently reading and talked enthusiastically about what they had to say.

Like her father, Victor, G3 Dawn also has taken an eclectic and unconventional religious pathway throughout the ups and downs of life. She had some exposure to religion in her family while growing up, through her mother and grandmother. As an adult, she married an abusive man, which led to the end of organized religion for her. "I stopped going to church and I was really mad at God," she says. "I just couldn't do it. . . . And all the stuff that, in church, didn't offer me any comfort. It didn't make any sense." Because she knew some alcoholics who were "driving [her] crazy," she started attending Al-Anon. "And that is kind of where I get my religion these days, from AA." Now fifty-six, Dawn says that she believes in God but that she just does not go to church. "I just feel like I can have a spiritual connection without that. But it's important to me. I mean, in my personal life, it's something that I think about quite often."

Dawn's daughter, thirty-six-year-old G4 Gina, defined herself as an atheist. In her interview she told us how highly she values the liberal, humanistic point of view she received from her family. She describes how she and Gabriel, her husband, who is also an atheist, view religion:

Religion is not important to us. In fact, I would say that we are antireligious. . . .You can teach morality without having to involve God. The Golden Rule is pretty simple and you don't need God to come down and tell you that. Religion is so dogmatic, so it contributes a lot to people hurting each other and not understanding each other.

When asked what religious values and beliefs she would like to pass on to her young children, Gina replied, "I value reason and science and treating people the way you would want to be treated, and I think that's a good basis for teaching my children the right values." Gina commented further that she would want her children to be atheists like herself and her husband:

Honestly, yes, I do. I'm not going to try to force them into anything, because I think that's wrong, but I will definitely be disappointed if they end up with some beliefs that I think are not very enlightened. So yeah, I'm going to raise them that way....I think there are kinder religions out there than Christianity. I think I would be most disappointed if they came and wanted to be like Baptists, Evangelicals, or something.

Gina affirmed she does not think her sisters are still going to church or are religious: "I don't think they are....My family is very centered around humanistic values, like enlightenment values, like being open to ideas and being aware of history and science."

In the Adams family we see a tradition of nonreligious, secular humanist values over several generations. G4 Gina defines herself as an atheist who married an atheist. She has not rejected the values of the older generation;

rather, it appears that she has made them even more explicit. The Adamses, within and across generations, display a range of religious beliefs (or lack of religious beliefs) and practices, and they seem to celebrate their diversity. Consciously, but more often implicitly through example, they have transmitted—over several generations—the values of being open and tolerant in religion, as well as a pattern of religious seeking. These values have helped them through many crises. Although this is a family whose members have faced a wide range of challenges including divorce, financial reversals, disabilities, and long-term illnesses, they show affection for each other and have a high degree of contact and interaction, despite geographic distance.

### **The Bakers: “Drenched in Atheism and Socialistic Values”**

Eric Baker, age thirty-one, has a negative view of religion. As we saw in chapter 2, he is an atheist who thinks religion is only interesting from a sociological point of view. “It’s amazing the stuff we’ve created out of our heads, as a human race,” he says. But unlike the findings of earlier studies that would suggest that atheism like Eric’s arises as a backlash against an intensely religious upbringing, he sees his atheism as part of his family’s secular humanist tradition. “My grandfather was [a] liberal academic and my great uncle was [a Communist],” he says. “So we’re pretty much drenched in atheism and socialistic values.”

The Bakers are a Jewish family with strong intergenerational traditions of social and political activism as well as Jewish cultural identity. But with the exception of G1 Donald Baker’s mother, G0 Golda, none are religiously observant Jews and none follow the practices and beliefs of any branch of Judaism. Donald’s daughter, G2 Robyn, told us that her grandmother was “the only one that I felt carried on the Jewish traditions in her life. Nobody else did.” This is a very close family made up of strong personalities who are intensely committed to humanistic values and liberal ideals that are rooted in the history and experiences of previous generations of the family. As Donald’s son-in-law, Frank, put it, “They’re lefties from way back.”

They are decidedly nonreligious. Donald and his wife, Lydia, the latter of whom was ninety-seven when we interviewed her, were political activists who met at an antiwar organization meeting during World War II. They were “socialists and not religious”; they never went to synagogue or practiced Jewish religious traditions, even though they routinely joined Donald’s parents, who lived close by, for Hanukkah and Passover. But Lydia emphasizes that she is not antireligious:

No, I’m not an atheist. I believe in a spiritual something that has been a miraculously fantastic idea. But I never believed in a God. I would love to. But I think if there had been a God, I cannot imagine that He would allow this kind of brutal killing of each other.

Lydia and Donald’s seventy-two-year-old daughter, Robyn, who said she was “none” in each of her LSOG surveys throughout the thirty-five years of our study, talks about her religious identification in ambiguous terms. “I don’t know if I am a spiritual person. I still kind of leave myself open. I think if something came along, maybe like Unitarianism or something, I would still be open if I felt the need for something additional in my life. [I’m afraid] not to believe. . . . God knows, when my daughter was sick, and my husband was sick, I was afraid not to.”

Robyn’s G3 daughter, Laura, age fifty-two, has no religious affiliation and does not believe in God or a higher power but says she is a spiritual person. Laura attributes her morality to what she learned from her grandparents:

I think [my values came] from my grandparents when I was young— certain values of equality and justness, what’s right and what’s wrong....Those values were definitely put on us or passed on to us through their efforts, their political efforts . . . to make social change for the benefit of all. That definitely was part of their lives, and I think that was passed on to us.

When we put the Baker family stories together, we find this is a liberal family across five generations with a very

strong legacy of political activism and critical thinking about what it means to be religious, nonreligious, and anti-religious. Their Jewish background is part of the family narrative, but the importance of this identity is cultural, not religious, and this is consistent across generations. High intergenerational solidarity is evident in their longitudinal surveys. For several years Robyn and her children lived with Robyn's parents. The political discussions around the kitchen table laid the foundations for the younger generations' ethical and secular humanist values that were subsequently passed on to their own children and grandchildren—down the generational lineage. On the other hand, there are reports of periodic disagreements and feelings of distance between the generations—for example, the tension mentioned by several family members between Robyn's mother, Lydia, and her daughter prompted by her marriage to a non-Jew.

### **The Wagners: “I Have My Own Religion”**

Daphne Wagner was a teenager in 1970 when the LSOG surveys began. When she was asked, “What is your religious preference?” she responded, “I don't subscribe to a particular religion. I have my own religion.” When we interviewed Daphne thirty-six years later, she had this to say:

I'm not at all religious. But I am spiritual . . . [which] involves taking control of my life and my beliefs versus waiting for someone else to . . . Spirituality is something that comes from within, and you decide yourself how you're going to believe.

For Daphne, now age fifty-two, religion is something entirely different from spirituality. “Religion to me is organized, and in a building, and being dictated to by another person telling you how to believe, and if you don't do this, that's wrong,” she says. “I don't need someone in the church interpreting a book to tell me how to live or be.”

She sees moral values and ethical behavior as unrelated to religion. “I think honesty is the most important, and being open, and helping people, and being of service to those in need....You don't need a church to tell you that.”

Over the almost four decades that Daphne has participated in our study, her views on religion and spirituality have remained very consistent, despite disappointments with marriage and children, ups and downs of employment, and problems with health and finances. She has never had any involvement with a church or religious group. Another feature that has remained constant is Daphne's close relationship with her parents and grandparents, the legacy of a family lineage that is very affectionate, very supportive—and very nonreligious. The portrait of the Wagners emerging from the interviews is a family that is “spiritual but not religious.” There is remarkable similarity across the generations in their nonreligious identification and in the way they express their beliefs and values. They are quite clear about the differences between spirituality and religion. Each describes the values they hold as being important with an almost “religious” intensity—values of freedom, individual choice, and living an ethical life.

Daphne's grandfather, G1 Irving, also reported his religious affiliation as “none” in each of his LSOG surveys before his death in the early 2000s. His wife, Fanny, was ninety-two when we interviewed her in 2008. When asked how she would describe her religion, she briskly replied, “Don't have any—only my own.” She then added, “Believing that you have to go attend church to believe in God, that's not important....I've seen a lot of religious persons that thought they were religious, and I thought they were hypocrites.”

Fanny participated in various religious education activities when she was growing up, but none appeared to have had any lasting effect. In high school she went to the Latter-Day Saints (LDS) Church “because all the kids I ran around with were Mormon, and they liked to dance, and I liked to dance.” She recalled being interviewed by the LDS bishop for membership, but when a church member came to her door to ask for her monetary donation, “I got turned off. . . . I decided if I want to pray I'll do it at home.” In early adulthood she attended a

nondenominational Evangelical church, but not for long. All this resulted in a distaste for organized religion: “I never could tolerate self-righteous people.

Fanny and Irving’s daughter, seventy-three-year-old G2 Bernadine, told us that she was Mormon as a child. However, Bernadine reported “none” as her religious affiliation in most of the LSOG surveys she completed over the years. In her recent surveys, she wrote “spirituality” when asked her about her religious affiliation. She believes in a higher power but defines it as being outside any church or organized religion. Using words almost identical to those of her mother, Bernadine explains:

I don’t subscribe to a particular religion. I have my own....I feel I have a connection, a force within me that connects to the higher self. It’s just my string that goes from me to my God...to power. I don’t see why people would go to a building and have men telling you what to believe.

Bernadine’s value orientations have been very consistent over the eight waves of data collection. In each survey she selected “an ethical life (responsible living toward all)” from a list of personal values as being most important in her life. She also ranked highly “service to mankind” and “equality” and “a world at peace”; she ranked “religious participation” as the least important value in her life. Other important values for Bernadine are “freedom” and “individual choice,” which she mentions in talking about what she wanted to pass on to her daughter, Daphne. Children should be able “to choose and decide what’s right and wrong, what to do and not do. My parents never tried to push their values on me and I didn’t want to [push mine] on [Daphne].” Despite this emphasis on independence from parental values and freedom of choice—or perhaps because of it—Bernadine’s values are remarkably similar to those of her parents, as are her daughter Daphne’s.

In the Wagner family we find a tradition of no religious involvement across four generations. Instead, the members of each generation emphasize spirituality, “something that comes from within,” in contrast to religion, or “another person telling you how to live.” There is also a tradition of placing a high value on ethics and morality. Being honest, staying open-minded, encouraging children to choose for themselves—these are mentioned as important values that have influenced the Wagner children. These values, in deed and word, appear to have produced similar views of spirituality across several generations.

Where does the Wagners’ generational continuity in nonreligious spirituality come from? One likely explanation is the high degree of family solidarity evident across generations and the successful modeling of spirituality these close emotional bonds may have engendered. These close bonds and mutual high regard are evident in all the survey data provided by members of the Wagner family. Since 1970, in every survey Bernadine reported that she feels “extremely close” to her mother, Fanny, and to her daughter, Daphne. Similarly, in each of her surveys Daphne says she feels “extremely close” to her mother, Bernadine, and “very close” to her grandmother, Fanny, a sentiment Fanny holds toward her daughter and granddaughter as well.

### **The Shepherds: “Stop Shoving Religion Down My Throat!”**

Previous studies have suggested that one of the most common pathways to atheism is family religious conflict; in this scenario, atheists actively reject the religious constraints and rigidities of their zealously religious parents. Thirty-one-year-old Brianna Shepherd is a none, as is her brother Ivan, age thirty-six. They say they do not believe in God or a higher power. But their mother, Nora, is a very religious woman who says her life is centered on being a Christian. When we asked Ivan “Is there any role that religion plays in your life?” he replied, “Yeah, it irritates me.” His childhood allowed for no individual choice in matters of faith. “I was forced to go to church for, like, the first twelve years of my life by my mother and grandparents. That was a negative as far as religion is concerned because [of] no religious choice,” he says. “The more I wanted to ask questions the less I got answers. I kind of got bitter towards the whole thing. Now I’m an atheist.”

Ivan and Brianna’s parents divorced when they were very young, and they were raised by their mother. Ivan

describes his mother as “very religious” today, as she was during the years he grew up. He adds that her intense religiosity has caused conflict in their relationship in the past and would do so now if he allowed himself to get into a discussion of religion with her. As a child he attended a religious school associated with his mother’s church. He said he fully believed in the religious messages he was taught until as a teenager, when he started questioning religion along with parental authority. In each of the LSOG surveys he participated in since joining the study eighteen years ago, he mentions religion as a key area of disagreement with his mother and lists his religious preference as “none” or “atheist.”

Ivan’s sister Brianna is also nonreligious. She too sees this as a reaction to her family and her mother’s heavy religiosity, but she calls herself more of an agnostic than her brother: “I mean there could be something, but I don’t know, I really don’t know, and so I don’t really choose to put all my energy into something that I don’t know.” Like Ivan, Brianna rebelled when she was a teenager. “I didn’t want to go to church three times a week, and she was really strict,” Brianna explains. “She wouldn’t let me hang out with my friends...I couldn’t go out on dates and stuff.” Brianna ran away from home but came back after her mother agreed to “stop shoving religion down my throat.”

Their mother, G3 Nora, fifty-four, is a devout nondenominational Christian. She attends church several times a week and says she is “very religious.” Her own parents were highly religious, although their fundamentalist religion is different than her faith today. She says it is painful that both of her children have rebelled. She doesn’t understand how this could have occurred since she always followed her faith and tried to be the best parent she could:

I’ve raised my daughter with a strong Christian value which at this point in her life she is adamantly rejecting. It has been extremely disappointing as a parent not to successfully impart to your children what you hold to be most precious and important in life. . . . Our lifestyles and reasons for living are diametrically opposed. My life is very much centered on my beliefs as a Christian. . . . Her belief system brings me a lot of sorrow.

In the Shepherd family story we see two members of the younger generation who broke with their mother’s intense fundamentalist Christianity. Both Ivan and Brianna reflect what has in previous eras been regarded as the most common pathway to religious nonbelief in America. Raised in a highly religious family context, they are Religious Rebels who have rejected the rigidity and constraints of their background (see chapter 7). Such an explanation would be plausible if we limited our comparison to just two generations. In our interview study, however, we have data from three and four generations, so we can trace religious influences farther back than the two-generation parent–child relationship. When we do so, we see a three-generation tradition on their father’s side of nonsectarian moral and perhaps spiritual values but without religious content. Ivan and Brianna are aware of these influences, primarily from their paternal grandmother, and believe that they have had a positive impact on their lives. Ivan explains:

[My grandma] studied cultures...And her values—she really enjoyed studying different religions and stuff mainly for the stories . . . She was more accepting of a lot of stuff than my other grandparents and my mom. And I’m sure that had a lot of influence on me.

Thus, while Ivan and Brianna might be Religious Rebels in reaction to their mother’s fervent Christian piety, their father is nonreligious while their paternal grandparents seem to have served as role models for religious openness and an evolving antireligious perspective.

### **Family Contexts of the Nonreligious**

Where are the increasing numbers of nones coming from? What are the family backgrounds and dynamics,



across generations, which augur a switch from the religion of one's youth to nonreligion or nonbelief? As we saw earlier in the chapter, the limited research available stresses that many who have taken the path of nonbelief have rejected their parents' religious faith, often because it was too demanding or their parents were overly zealous in their religious socialization.<sup>27</sup> Scholars have observed that atheism in particular can be the result of religious rebellion. Atheists are often considered the “black sheep” of the family. However, another possibility is that atheism is not a break from a family's religious tradition but actually represents continuity with the family's moral and ethical value orientations. We've seen that there is a high degree of intergenerational similarity—continuity—in nonreligion today, and the transmission of nonreligion from parents to their children can be seen to a far greater degree than in the recent past.

The big question for sociologists and psychologists studying origins of adult nonbelief in a culture that strongly emphasizes belief is this: How do nonreligious traditions evolve in the absence of social institutions—something similar to churches, synagogues, temples, parochial schools, or summer Bible camps—that would promote or reinforce unconventional views? A large number of our nonreligious respondents said that their parents (or grandparents) taught them or exemplified the values they chose to emulate. As we reviewed the interview data, it was clear that most of the nonreligious parents in our sample were quite articulate about their nontheistic ethical standards and moral value systems. In fact, many nonreligious parents were more coherent and passionate about their ethical principles than some of the “religious” parents in our study. The vast majority appeared to live goal-filled lives characterized by moral direction and a sense of life having purpose. The values expressed by these nones were aligned with many of the basic values espoused in the Bible, the Torah, and the Qur'an: We heard “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”; “give generously to those in need”; “help those who need help”; “love your neighbor as yourself”; and “heal the sick, give to the poor, do justice to all.” Or, as Phillip Zuckerman puts it, among the nonreligious he interviewed, “There is less concern with the specific do's and don'ts [of organized religion], what is important is how they treat other people.”

But secular and atheist parents describe a challenge that is very different from what worries most of the religious parents in our sample: How to impart their values and beliefs without “brainwashing” their children. Zuckerman notes that

[Many] apostate parents realize that they initially became religious [as children] only because their parents raised them to be religious. While they certainly want to pass on their own secular values, secular opinions, and secular beliefs to their children, they don't want to “commit the same crime” of indoctrinating their kids to think just like them. They'd like their children to come to their own decisions, about religion, life, death, and morality—something they themselves weren't allowed to do.

For religious parents—especially the strongly devout and heavily involved—it is a joy and a duty to bring up their children in the fold, to teach them the tenets of their religion with earnest devotion, and to do all they can to ensure that their children become enmeshed in their religious tradition. It is just what a good parent ought to do. But for parents who are apostates, there is much more self-doubt when it comes to raising children to be secular or not.

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