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The Rise of “No Religion”: towards an explanation

The Paul Hanley Furfey Lecture 2016, Delivered at the Association for the Study of Religion (ASR) 2016
annual conference, Seattle

Final version published in *Sociology of Religion*, srx031, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srx031>
[https://academic.oup.com/socrel/article/doi/10.1093/socrel/srx031/4079669/2016-Paul-Hanly-Furfey-
LectureThe-Rise-of-No](https://academic.oup.com/socrel/article/doi/10.1093/socrel/srx031/4079669/2016-Paul-Hanly-Furfey-LectureThe-Rise-of-No)

08 August 2017

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ABSTRACT

By 2015 those who said they had “no religion” when asked about religion on surveys and censuses had become an absolute majority in Britain. Drawing on surveys and interviews carried out in Great Britain between 2013 and 2015 this lecture offers a portrait of the “nones” and attempts to explain their rise to become a cultural majority.

The Rise of “No Religion”: attempting an explanation

The Paul Hanley Furfey Lecture 2016¹

Linda Woodhead

The rise of “no religion” has been swift in many formerly-Christian liberal democracies, from the USA to Australia. In few places has it happened more decisively than in Britain where there is now a “no religion” majority and Christianity finds itself for the first time in second place.

I have documented the rise of “no religion” in more detail elsewhere (Woodhead 2016a), but will begin this paper with a summary account, not least because I have refined my understanding in a number of respects. After profiling the “nones” (those who tick the “no religion” box on censuses and surveys) I will make my first serious attempt to explain this profound cultural transition. My focus is Britain where I have carried out the most extensive research on “no religion”, but I look sideways to other parts of the world as well.

THE NEW NORMAL

If you attended a funeral in Britain in the 1980s you would have known exactly what to expect. It would have been organized by professional undertakers, led by a member of the Christian clergy, and taken place in a church or a crematorium. There would have been a funeral service with a set liturgical form and hymns would be sung. It would be orderly and predictable. Apart from the hymn-singing there would be few demands on you other than to show up and wear suitably sombre clothing. Traditionally the service would be followed immediately by burial of the body though in the course of the 20th century the growing

popularity of cremation broke that link: cremation is now more common in Britain than burial. Ashes would be picked up by the family on a later date and might be buried in a graveyard or scattered somewhere of the family's choosing, normally in private.

Fast forward a few decades to 2015 and things have changed considerably. If you were organizing the funeral yourself you would have a great deal more choice. You would probably still use an undertaker to arrange it, but you might decide to do it yourself or engage a new kind of funeral director, often female, who offers a one-stop shop - literally in a shop premises in some cases - with everything done as you want it, including bringing in the sort of celebrant you desire (the triumph of retail over ecclesiastical). Even a traditional undertaker will now give you a choice of a religious or a secular celebrant, and there are many kinds to choose from, from humanist to "green." You will be asked whether you want the ceremony (not "service") to be celebratory, reflective, sad, humorous, solemn or some combination of these. You also have more choice about how the body is disposed of and memorialized: where and whether to make a memorial, how to decorate it, and whether it should be temporary or permanent. It is also becoming more common to start with a private ceremony for disposal of the body followed by a public ceremony to celebrate the life of the deceased. In short, almost everything is now up for grabs.

For the previous fifteen hundred years or so the vast majority of funerals in Britain had been Christian. Until recently it was tautological to say "a Christian funeral." By 2015 that had changed. When I asked a nationally-representative sample what kind of funeral they would like, a quarter said Christian, 36% non-religious, and 23% a mix.² The non-religious funeral had become completely normal. By "normal" I don't just mean a matter of numbers - the point at which an absolute majority, more than half the population, chose a non-religious funeral - I also mean socially, culturally and emotionally normal. I mean the point at which people feel perfectly comfortable with something and expect it.

As recently as 1990 a non-religious funeral was still unusual. It would usually be performed by a humanist celebrant and would be a clear statement that the deceased was an atheist and wanted nothing to do with religion. By 2015 it was the Christian funeral which had become a bit strange. Fewer people knew when to stand up and when to sit down and they didn't know how to sing the hymns. So the safer option for a bereaved family was to opt for a broadly non-religious funeral in which there were a few religious elements for older relatives, perhaps a prayer. By 2015 even humanist celebrants were facing stiff competition – they were the only ones to retain a commitment to secular atheism, while a plethora of other kinds of non-clerical celebrant were happy to allow people to design whatever a sort of celebration they wanted. A Christian funeral had become a religious statement, something which would exclude as well as include, not just “what everyone does”, but explicitly secular funerals had not taken its place. Something more intriguing was happening, something which had blurred the traditional categories of social-scientific reflection, the religious and the secular.

THE RISE OF “NO RELIGION”

Because I have been studying religion in Britain for the last quarter century my career as a sociologist of religion has coincided with the rise of “no religion.” Between 2007 and 2015 I was Director of a national research programme called “Religion and Society” which generated a great deal of new, mainly qualitative, data giving fascinating glimpses of what was happening in Britain and abroad.³ It encouraged me to begin interviewing nones and researching funerals and other rituals, and I embarked on an experiment with a professional photographer, Liz Hingley, in which we asked people to come to be photographed by her with a “spiritual object,” after which I would interview them about their choice. Between 2013 and 2015 I also carried out a series of large, nationally-representative surveys in Britain

in order to gauge the nature and extent of what we were finding in the more in-depth empirical work.⁴

These surveys revealed a remarkably swift growth of “no religion” across Great Britain. When I first polled in January 2013 nones represented 41% of the population; by December 2015 that had grown to 50%. The numbers told the story and the story was confirmed by the British Social Attitudes Survey which has been asking about religion since 1983. Fig 1 shows the steady growth of “no religion” according to BSA, rising by two-thirds in just thirty years to reach majority status.

Fig 1. *Proportion of British people reporting no religion*

Source: *British Social Attitudes Survey*

	1983	1993	2003	2013
No religion	31.4	36.8	43.4	50.6

We don't know exactly when the rise of no religion began. Callum Brown (2017) believes it was in the 1960s and that we are dealing with a short, sharp cultural revolution. His figures bear this out for Canada and the USA but are less convincing for Britain. Both open critique and quiet indifference to religion have a long history in Britain, the country of David Hume and Charles Darwin, and it is quite possible that the rise of no religion here has been slow and steady over the course of many decades, perhaps for over a century -- but there are no surveys against which to check.

In any case, the high figure today shows that Britain is one of the frontrunners in “no religion” amongst formerly-Christian countries. There are two ranks. In Tier One are countries where nones are in the majority: the Czech Republic, Estonia, the Netherlands,

New Zealand. In Tier Two with “no religion” growing fast and nones already amounting to around a quarter of the population are Canada, France, Germany (higher in the east), Australia and the USA. In the USA the proportion of nones took off only very recently but rocketed to reach a quarter of the population by 2015.⁵ Then there are non-Christian countries in which there is a “no religion” majority, of which China is by far the largest. Here the situation is different from the formerly-Christian countries, with “no religion” being more longstanding and not incompatible with a plethora of popular forms of spiritual and ritual practice: for historical and political reasons the “religion” category is not applicable here in the way it is in Christian-heritage countries.

The rise of no religion may continue in various parts of the globe, but if the Pew Research Foundation’s projections are accurate it is unlikely to take share from the existing religions. Although “no religion” is benefitting from more conversions than any religion, nones tend to have relatively low fertility rates – so although their total number is projected to increase by more than 100m to 1.2bn by 2050 this represents a falling share of the total world population, from 16% in 2010 to 13% in 2050.⁶

THE NONES

One of the most striking findings of research on the nones in liberal democracies is just how indistinct they are from the wider populations in their home countries in many respects. In Britain my surveys reveal that they are as likely to be female as male, uneducated as educated, and that they come from all social classes and every part of the country. In terms of ethnicity, however, the British census categories tell us that they are disproportionately likely to be “white British”: 93% compared to 86% of the total population. This doesn’t mean that “no religion” is exclusive to white Britons: Chinese Britons, for example, are even more likely to identify as nones, but there simply aren’t as many Chinese Britons as white ones.

Interestingly, people of mixed white/black ethnicity, including mixed white/black Caribbean and mixed white/black African, are at least as likely to be nones as are those of white British ethnicity, suggesting that the higher level of Christian adherence seen in recently-arrived first- and second-generation African migrants and their Pentecostal churches will decline if inter-marriage occurs at the high rate it had for previous generations.

But the most distinguishing mark of the nones is their relative youthfulness. Figure 2 shows this in detail. If we compare “Christian” and “no religion” there is a striking contrast between the youngest cohort (aged 18-24) with around 60% reporting no religion and 30% “Christian”, and the oldest (aged 60 and over) where the proportions are reversed. If we exclude those belonging to non-Christian faiths, two-thirds of under- 40s now say they have no religion.

Figure 2: *No religion and religion by age*

Source: Linda Woodhead/YouGov December 2015

Age cohort	No religion	Christian	Other religion (including those who prefer not to state their religion)	No religion as % of the population (excluding Other religion)
18-24	60%	27%	13%	69%
25-39	55%	32%	13%	63%
Under 40s aggregated	56%	31%	13%	65%
40-59	45%	46%	7%	49%
60+	34%	60%	5%	36%
Over 40s	40%	54%	6%	43%

aggregated				
Total	46%	44%	10%	51%

I have factored in “Other” religions besides Christianity (Hinduism, Islam etc.) in Figure 2 because like “no religion” many of these also have a youthful profile and are growing – though unlike “no religion” their growth is mainly due to high inward migration to Britain in the post-war period and higher birth rates. Even so, as the fourth column of Figure 2 shows, their growing share of religious affiliation has not been enough to counter the rise of “no religion”. As the fifth and final column shows, if you are younger being non-religious is the norm.

Figure 3: *Religious affiliation by age, GB*

Source: Linda Woodhead/YouGov Jan 2014

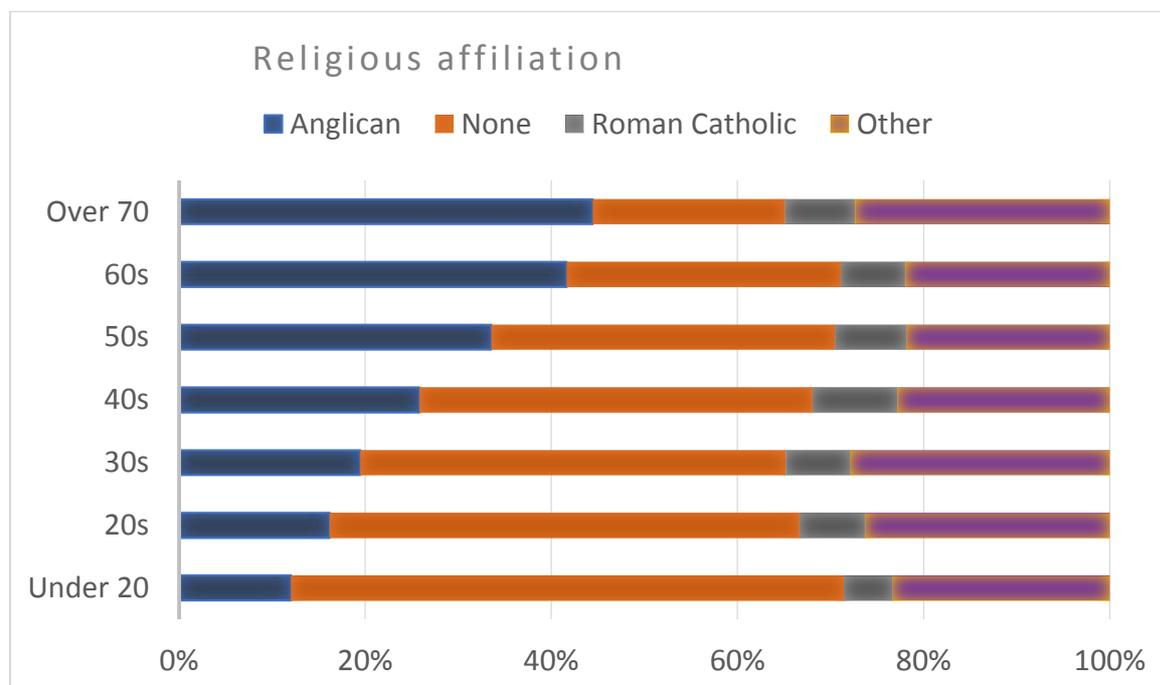


Figure 3 shows the expansion of no religion relative to different denominations in Great Britain. It makes it look as if its rise exactly mirrors the decline of the Church of England (Anglican), and although this is partly true (not least because the Church of England is and has been since the Reformation the largest single denomination in Britain) it masks the fact that the free Protestant churches which were once the CofE's main rivals have dwindled away even faster. The Roman Catholic Church has seen proportionally similar losses as the CofE, especially in relation to attendance, but this has been somewhat masked in the case of the Roman Catholic Church by more resilient levels of adherence (saying you are Catholic even if you don't go to church or follow Church teachings) and above all by migration to Britain from within the EU, particularly of Catholics from eastern Europe (Christians are the single largest religious group by migration in post-war Britain, larger even than Muslims who now make up at least 5% of the population).

There is no sign that these trends – the decline of Christianity and the rise of no religion – are going to stop. The youthfulness of nones relative to Christians means that Christianity is literally dying out whilst “no religion” is burgeoning. It's tempting to imagine that the mechanism of growth is conversion: people question their Christian faith and become “none”. Bullivant (2017) describes this as “nonversion”, and Brown (2017) has conducted a series of fascinating interviews with “nonverts” around the world.⁷ But adult switching is actually less important in the rise of “no religion” than children deviating from the religious commitments of one or both of their parents. If we analyse the BSA data, which asks a question about religion of upbringing, we see that for people who say they were raised Christian there is a 45% change they will end up identifying as nones, but for those raised with “no religion” there is a 95% probability that they will stay that way. Thus “no religion” is currently “sticky” in a way Christianity is not. This of course means that not only are “no religion” parents more likely to produce “no religion” children, those children will do the

same – so the pool of the non-religious goes on growing, even if their birth rate is not as high as that of religious people. The result is that more and more children are raised in Britain with little or no first-hand knowledge of the Christian faith.⁸ Many will still have Christian grandparents, but in a generation or two even that will have ceased to be true.

As with demographic characteristics, nones share many attitudes and commitments with the rest of the population – the “somes”. The thing which makes them stand out most clearly in my surveys is their strong and unvarying commitment to making up their own minds. This lies behind their defining refusal to be labelled as religious even if they believe in God. Amongst other reasons, they tick the “no religion” box on surveys as a way of clearing the ground for a unique identity and refusing to be classed with those who are willing to see themselves as examples of a category.

This liberal spirit - a spirit of independence - is widespread in Britain as a whole. When asked how they make up their minds about difficult decisions, the overwhelming majority of British people, including many somes, say that they consult their own conscience, reason and intuition rather than relying on an external authority. But nones are even more likely to say this. Moreover, questioned about concrete moral issues they are more uniformly liberal/independent. That doesn't mean they think “anything goes” -- they may have quite strict codes of personal ethics -- but they believe that everyone should be free to decide how they want to live their own lives so long as they don't harm others.

In 2013 when I carried out a survey asking a series of questions about personal morality one of the most controversial topics – on which there was a clear split – was same-sex marriage which at the time was still being debated in Parliament (it was made lawful in Great Britain later that year). The other most controversial topics were assisted dying (illegal in Britain) and abortion (legal up to 24 weeks, under certain conditions). On each of these three issues nones came down firmly on the liberal side of the debate – that's to say they

were permissive, believing that it should be up to the adults involved to make up their own minds what to do and that no-one, including church or state, should dictate. Most some agreed, but significant numbers did not. If we aggregate attitudes towards these three issues to construct a liberalism scale, 83% of Britons fall at the extreme liberal/permissive end of that scale but 100% of nones.⁹ The least likely to be liberal on these issues are British Muslims (though a majority are liberal), members of conservative evangelical Christian denominations -- and the bishops and official teachings of the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church. Leaving aside their leaders, however, Anglicans as a whole are almost as liberal as nones, scoring 92% on the liberalism scale, with lay Catholics not far behind.¹⁰ In relation to personal morality Britain is probably one of the most liberal countries in the world, the nones are just more so.

In politics, however, there is not much to separate nones from some. My surveys find them to be spread across the spectrum of (moderate) leftwing to (moderate) rightwing in a very similar way to the population as a whole, with under a third being left-leaning, just under a third right-leaning, and the rest -- a plurality -- being centrist in their political attitudes. In the US political system a similar sort of positioning translates into nones being overwhelmingly Democrat simply because the British Conservative party is much more liberal than the Republican party on many issues, including abortion and same-sex marriage (the latter was pushed through by a Conservative government).

Different from the left-wing/right-wing scale, though often illicitly elided, is the scale of attitudes to do with being nationally-rooted or more global in outlook -- the "somewheres" and "anywheres" as Goodhart (2017) puts it. Plotting nones on such a scale shows that they are rather more likely to be global/cosmopolitan in outlook than some, but that is mainly because members of the Church of England in particular are rather strongly national. On Brexit, for example, around a half of nones were in favour of leaving compared the European

Union compared with two thirds of Anglicans and, as Figure 4 shows, and the difference remains even when you take account of age.

Fig 4 *How did you vote in the EU Referendum? By religion*

Source: Linda Woodhead/You Gov, July 2016 ¹¹

Percent Leave	All	CofE	None
All	53%	66%	47%
Female	57%	68%	50%
Male	50%	64%	44%
ABC1	46%	63%	37%
C2DE	64%	71%	63%
Under 40	37%	49%	35%
40 to 59	57%	66%	51%
Over 60	66%	72%	61%
London	41%	57%	35%

What about identity: who do nones think they are? In the normal course of things they probably wouldn't describe themselves as non-religious unless pressed by a survey or by someone trying to sell them some kind of religion. Brexit suggests that whilst some think of themselves in terms of national identity – Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish, English, British -- these identities, particularly Englishness, are generally less important for nones than for their mainly Anglican forbears and contemporaries. Obviously nones they don't think of themselves in terms of a religious identity, and they're not particularly keen to be labelled "spiritual" either. When I asked the "spiritual but not religious" question in a form which gives a more positive option for those who don't identify with either "religious" or "spiritual" most take it (Figure 5):

Fig 5 *Neither Spiritual nor Religious*

Source: Woodhead/YouGov 2013

Which, if any, of the following best describes you?

	Somes	Nones
A spiritual person	15	8
A religious person	8	1
Both spiritual and religious	10	1
I would not describe myself, or my values and beliefs, as spiritual or religious	48	67
None of these	13	19
Don't know	6	3

Nones are resistant to secular as well as religious labels. Only about 2% identify as “secular” or “humanist”. “Atheist” is not popular either, even for nones who don’t believe in God. They don’t think this defines them. As Euan, 16, said to me in a “spiritual object” interview,

I’m trying to get into Buddhism. I went to Japan on holiday and was fascinated by the temples and I think I’ve always wanted to belong to something but I’m not sure a God is right for me. I think more a way of life. I think the kind of peace and kind of... its hard to put a finger on it... umm... yeah, just the train of thought that kind of goes with it.

My surveys show that nones exhibit a range of views about the existence of God or a “higher power” (Figure 6). Over 40% are convinced atheists, with a larger proportion being less definite: open-minded, sceptical, undecided, or just “dunno.” About one in twenty are firm believers in God. As to what kind of God, most say a personal God, and the rest say spirit, life-force, energy, or simply “there is something there”.

Figure 6 *Belief in God or a Higher Power*
Source: Woodhead/YouGov 2013, 2014

	Nones	Somes
Yes, there is definitely a God or some “higher power”	5.5%	39%
Yes, there is probably a God or some “higher power”	11%	29%
No, there is probably NOT a God or some “higher power”	23%	11%
No, there is definitely NOT a God some “higher power”	41.5%	6%
Don”t know	18.5%	15%

Most nones are not the doughty secularists which some versions of secularization theory expected, but they are certainly more sceptical about the existence of God than those who identify as religious – and that scepticism grows with each younger generation of nones. When I combined indicators like disbelief in God and hostility to faith schools to find out how many nones are strongly anti-religious in the fashion of Richard Dawkins only 13% fit the bill. The growth of no religion can’t be conflated with the growth of the sort of secularism championed by the so-called new atheists, atheism has not been growing anything like as fast as no religion, and atheism doesn’t share no religion’s youthful age profile.

As for religious practices, again my surveys reveal diversity. A quarter of nones report taking part in some kind of personal religious or spiritual practice in the course of a month, like praying. What they absolutely don’t do is take part in communal practices like worship, in contrast to American nones who are much more likely to have congregational

involvement. British nones are nevertheless rather tolerant of organized religion and its leaders though they take no notice of what they say. In 2015 the only religious leaders they expressed much regard for were Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama, and to a lesser extent Pope Francis.¹² Not surprisingly nones hate being preached at and told what to do; they want to think for themselves and make up their own minds.

EXPLAINING THE RISE OF NO RELIGION

The rise of “no religion” is unique when compared to other examples of religious change in British history because it has happened without leadership or orchestration. It is not a social or a political movement, nor is it what Walby (2009) refers to as a cultural “project” with many different actors, organizations and waves -- like Protestantism or feminism. Certainly there are institutional changes which have played a role in the rise of no religion, but it has not grown because people joined a “no religion” movement or followed a charismatic leader; it has emerged slowly and gradually as one by one individuals made rather personal decisions which led to this outcome. In most cases it is not even an identity they have chosen.

If I have made much of the fact that nones became a majority in Britain in 2015 and that even before then “no religion” was becoming the norm – as in funerals – this is not because I imagine that future generations will be socialised into “no religion” as once they were into religious identities, but because social norms are salient. They have weight and momentum. More human life and behaviour has to do with habit than reasoned choice, and however much modern liberals may think they are unique individuals they too generally try to fit in. Once something becomes the norm it becomes the default position – “just what you do” – and you have to opt out rather than opt in. Moreover, once Christianity and churchgoing ceased to be the norm and once that social pressure lifted, increasing numbers of

people simply stopped going. Given the choice, they opted out. This is further reason why the growth of “no religion” is likely to continue.

As the changing nature of funerals shows, the shift away from “Christian” seems to have had more to do with people wanting the freedom to plan them for themselves – and not finding or expecting that clergy would accommodate that – than with a strong rejection of religion. That people remain open to having religious and non-religious, traditional and non-traditional elements in a funeral is an indication that “no religion” is characteristically undogmatic. Rather than forming an identity in opposition to religion it says: “live and let live”. If granny would like a prayer and hymn at the funeral let’s have it, and if fellow citizens want to walk round cities in full face veil or in the formal hat and suits of *haredim*, fine, that’s up to them so long as they don’t impose their choices. Nones reject religion undogmatically and a large part of what they are rejecting is the dogmatism rather of religion rather than religion *tout court*. As Gordon, aged 40, said,

I’m not a fan of organised religion, it has such a bad reputation these days. The basis of all religions is the spiritual side. There have just been people who have used it to manipulate... A God of your understanding is whatever you want it to be. You don’t have to have all these iconic symbols. They say in AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] it can be the teapot!

Clearly then, one of the broader social shifts which lies behind the rise of “no religion” and explains its affinity with liberal democracies is the way in which more and more people – wave after wave of the previously more marginalized – have come to have more voice and choice in the course of the 20th Century, largely as a result of sustained campaigns and political efforts. This is what the cultural theorist Raymond Williams described as the “long democratic revolution.” In Britain its roots go back well before the 19th

Century but it became more widely accepted and mainstream after the 1960s and remains unfinished. It has involved more social categories of people being able to acknowledge, express and act upon their own desires: black as well as white, women as well as men, queer people as well as straight, disabled as well as able-bodied, young as well as old, laity as well as clergy. The cultural and political roots of this long revolution are various and it has been institutionalized in many different forms: in mass education and child-centred learning, in the expansion of higher education, in universal welfare and healthcare, in human rights and equality legislation, in consumerism and democratic arrangements. Though it has not been sufficiently noticed in theories of secularization and religious change, I believe it is of fundamental importance in understanding the rise of “no religion” – the latter represents one aspect of its outworking.

Having said that, this is not a social trend which led inevitably to the decline of the churches and organized religion, and it has not had the same effect in all other liberal democracies. In a forthcoming collaborative book comparing the seven historic national churches of northern Europe, for example, we highlight the resilience of the Nordic churches compared with the British (Woodhead and Iverson 2018). Despite being historically similar and located in similar liberal democratic countries undergoing the same sort of long revolution, these Churches have not followed the same trajectory. Figure 7 illustrates what I mean by comparing the most successful -- the Church of Denmark -- with the rapidly-declining Church of England. The difference is striking. In part it can be explained by the way in which the Church of Denmark has kept in step with the democratic revolution (e.g. in relation to women and gay people) whereas the Church of England has done the opposite, partly because of the influence of conservative evangelicalism/fundamentalism. As we show in a recent book on the decline of the CofE since the 1980s it is not just that the English

people became less religious and dogmatic; their national Church became more so (Brown and Woodhead 2016).

Figure 7 Statistical Comparison of the Church of England and the Church of Denmark¹³

	CofE (2013)	CofD (2014)	<i>note</i>
Baptism	12%	64%	% live births
Weddings	20%	34%	% all weddings
Funerals	33%	83%	% all funerals
Average Sunday attendance	1.5%	2%	% of population
Self-Identification/affiliation	c.35% (say “CofE”) 2% are members (on electoral roll)	77% (pay church tax & are members)	% of population
Christmas	4.5% (Xmas eve & Xmas day)	20% (evening only)	% of population

Another social change which has undoubtedly influenced the rise of “no religion” is the way in which more people in Britain than ever before are directly confronted by cultural and religious diversity. This is no longer a matter of a distant empire but of the same level of diversity at home – for over three generations. In addition, more people than ever before travel abroad for work or pleasure and have access to a much greater range of culture and relationships by way of old and new media. Britain may have come late to cultural and religious diversity compared with many countries outside the West, but since the 1950s it has arrived very quickly. In religious terms it is now more diverse than the USA with larger proportions of more non-Christian faiths as well as “no religion.” Moreover, this is an

intensified kind of pluralism which is not just about “simple” inter-religious diversity (Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus etc), nor even the “twin pluralisms” of which Peter Berger (2014) speaks (the religious/secular as well as the inter-religious) but a cultural superdiversity in which being a Catholic can mean any number of different things and in which even hyphenated identities like Catholic-Buddhist or Jewish-pagan-lesbian or non-religious now sound rather old-fashioned (Woodhead 2016b). This does not necessarily lead to a rootless individualism, but we see pluralization reflected in the nones’ more cosmopolitan and less national attitudes and in their affirmation of diversity as a core value (Madge, Hemming and Stenson 2014). Cultural options are broader than ever before and individuals have the freedom and resources to explore and construct them. The magnitude of this change can be gauged by remembering that even as late as the 1970s there were many parts of Britain in which Protestants and Catholics were still suspicious of one another.

Influential also in the rise of “no religion” are marketization and consumerization. I mean, first, the way in which the mode and model of the marketplace has become dominant in both imagination and in reality such that spheres of life which were previously outside a market logic have been brought within it. And, second, the way in which individuals have been turned into both commodities and consumers, such that we increasingly think of how well we can “sell ourselves” and we habitually face the world as consumers who have choices. This factor cannot be as important as democratization/individualization and pluralization in the rise of no religion, for whilst there are few culturally plural liberal democracies not experiencing a rise of “no religion” there are many places deeply affected by marketization and consumerization which are not as affected. However, in combination – and when combined with increasing affluence and consumer power – this appears to be a powerful force in reinforcing the cherishing of independence, individuality and diversity which is so characteristic of the “no religion” generations.

One can also mention the importance of changing beliefs in the rise of “no religion” as many traditional secularization theories would do. My interviews with nones in the “spiritual object” series suggest that a combination of evolutionary biology and an expanded cosmological horizon informed by space-exploration and astro-physics are important in shaping younger people’s worldviews (passively at least), and that they often – but not always – make traditional belief in a benevolent and omnipotent creator God less plausible. However, the effect is less evident for young British Muslims, and is of course not really a problem for non-monotheistic religions including many Asian and indigenous traditions. And although belief in God - especially believing with certainty - is declining, there are some beliefs, including belief in a soul and an afterlife, which are still growing. Ideologically it may well be that the most important long-term influences playing out in “no religion” are a combination of liberal Protestantism and Romanticism sifted and reworked in the context of democracy, pluralism and consumer capitalism.

CONCLUSION

“No religion” can easily be criticized as an awkward and misleading term. There is truth in this charge, because “no religion” is not a new kind of religion, or a negation, or a merely oppositional identity. It’s not a category of exactly the same kind as the “religions” or one constructed in simple opposition to them. But on the other hand, the criticism is too sweeping because “no religion” also displays aspects of all these things.

The most important sense in which “no religion” is *not* a religion is that it is dissimilar to any kind of organized religion in Britain today, and deeply unlike the kind of modern, missional, non-liberal and confessional forms of Christianity which has become increasingly dominant in Britain since the 1980s. It rejects scriptures, leaders, dogma,

orthodoxy and higher authority in general. Indeed, its difference from this kind of religion is so great that it explains why “no religion” is not constructed in conscious opposition to institutional religion, particularly the Churches, in the way the new atheism does or “alternative” spirituality used to be (on the constitutive relationship between spirituality and Christianity see Woodhead 2011). The nones simply don’t have such religion on their horizons. Ironically, church leaders in Britain reference “no religion” more than the nones reference them – a clear indication of the reversal of majority/minority status they have experienced.

Yet “no religion” is not a mere negation, a secular subtraction of religion, a normative free-for-all or pure cultural diversity. It has some common sacred commitments which lend it more than a whiff of religion as viewed through a Durkheimian frame. British nones seem to be unified by an ethical stance. This is not orthodoxy or even orthopraxy but a sort of “orthoethike” or “autoarete”, for nones prioritize ethics over dogma and freedom over belonging. To repeat what Euan, quoted above, said: “I’m not sure a God is right for me. I think more a way of life.” The central commitment of “no religion” is that each and every human being should be free to decide how best to live his or her own life even if it involves bad choices. In some ways nones are anarchists and libertarians, for they think that everyone should be free to live their life in the way they choose (Rock 2014). But although individuals have a primary responsibility to make the most of their own lives, they have a subsidiary one to help others do the same. Democracy in the broadest sense is taken for granted, diversity is embraced as a good in its own right, and some forms of solidarity are valued very highly. As Lucy, aged 31, put it:

What’s the meaning of life? I think... it has to be about human connection, and understanding, and having compassion, and leave things better than when we found

them...And relationships. Finding your own path and being happy with it, and being happy with yourself. Yeh [looking at me] – but what about you?

These core commitments to freedom, diversity and loving-kindness are so broad that they can be played out with very different notes and melodies – deeply consumerist ones with a lot of conspicuous display at one extreme, or deeply ecological ones with a huge amount of commitment to the greater cause at the other. The vast range of acceptable possibilities safeguards the freedom and diversity which “no religion” supports. But not everything is acceptable. As Durkheim would also expect, there is a boundary which should not be crossed. Because the good lies in making the most of your life and helping other people do the same, a wasted life or a life cut short is tragic, and the abuse or destruction of another’s life is “evil” (a word commonly used in example to terrorist atrocities and other forms of violence, for example). This explains why it is only with the rise of “no religion” that sexual abuse and the abuse of children in general has been seen as a terrible offence. The sexual predator and the terrorist have become no religion’s symbols of ultimate evil. What’s more, it is evident that every act of terrorism committed in Britain by Islamists has forced the nones to further articulate, symbolize and mobilize around their shared values.¹⁴ As Madge et al (2014) show, despite their commitment to tolerance, there are some things nones will not tolerate.

To end this lecture for the ASR, let me observe that I think it is this ambiguous status as both like and unlike religion which explains why the Sociology of Religion has been able to take such a leading role in the study of “no religion.” It is not just that “religion” questions on surveys and censuses have been the canary in the coalmine alerting us to its growth, but that tools forged for the study of religion and religious change have thus far proved helpful for interrogating the rise of “no religion.” Insofar as “no religion” is unlike existing forms of Western religion, however, these tools are insufficient. This paper with its merely provisional account of the rise of “no religion” will no doubt illustrate that. The rise of “no religion” is

forcing a serious rethink of the Sociology of Religion, pushing it more firmly into the broader realm of culture and values, and offering scholars of religion in countries where the line between religion and culture has never been drawn as sharply to correct our ethnocentric biases.

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¹ I am extremely grateful to the ASR and its President, Professor Lori Beaman, for the invitation to deliver this lecture. Thanks also to Gerardo Marti for his assistance as I was preparing this paper for publication in *Sociology of Religion* and for his patience in waiting for me to do so.

² In addition 7% said ‘None of these’ and 9% ‘Don’t know’.

³ www.religionandsociety.org.uk

⁴ These surveys were designed by myself and administered by YouGov. They were nationally representative and had sample sizes of around 4,000 GB adults (not Northern Ireland) aged 18 and over. They are available at <http://faithdebates.org.uk/research/> I analysed the data with the assistance of Professor Bernard Silverman.

⁵ Figures from various sources, many supplied by researchers from the respective countries at a workshop on “No Religion” convened by myself and Detlef Pollak, May 2017, University of Muenster. See also Pew, “Global Religious Landscape”, Religious Composition by Country <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2012/12/globalReligion-tables.pdf>

⁶ Pew Research Center 2015. “Why People with No Religion are Projected to Decline as a Share of the World’s Population” <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/03/why-people-with-no-religion-are-projected-to-decline-as-a-share-of-the-worlds-population/>

⁷ Brown (2017) deals with adult conversions.

⁸ In the second survey I carried out in 2013 around half the population said they had had no contact at all with the Church of England in the past year, even by way of the media.

⁹ Of course, we set the “bar” on the liberalism scale ourselves – the point is to test the relative position of different groups.

¹⁰ In 2013 (before same-sex marriage became legal) 46% of nones supported the current abortion law compared with 37% of “somes” (those who identify with a religion), 62% thought same-sex marriage was right compared with 37% of somes, and 85% supported a liberalisation of the law concerning euthanasia compared with 70% of somes.

¹¹ Woodhead/YouGov. Sample Size: 3243 GB adults (aged 18+), Fieldwork: 7th - 11th July 2016

¹² Linda Woodhead/YouGov for the “*Tablet*” April 2015.

% having a favourable impression of

	Nones	All (total population)
The Dalai Lama	56%	57%
Desmond Tutu	41%	46%
Pope Francis	29%	40%

¹³ Source Denmark: <http://www.km.dk/folkekirken/kirkestatistik/> and for church attendance Marie Vejrup Nielsen and Hans Raun Iversen (eds.). *Tal om kirken. Undersøgelser af Folkekirkens aktivitets-og deltagerstatistik*. Publikationer fra Det Teologiske Fakultet 57. 2014. Source UK: CofE, *Statistics for Mission 2013*, London: Archbishops' Council, 2014 <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2112070/2013statisticsformission.pdf>

¹⁴ In fieldwork in Manchester in May 2017 in the weeks after the ISIS suicide-bomber's attack in the Manchester Arena I noted that the main values expressed on cards, floral tributes and in public books of condolence included kindness, diversity, love, freedom, enjoyment, and a commitment to the city itself and civic ideals. The act of violence was repeatedly described as "evil" and people were urged to resist it and not allow it to "win" by overcoming it with love and solidarity.