



WORLDVIEW MADE PRACTICAL
Volume 19 Number 1
January 3, 2024

The Increase in "Unbelief" Is Not an Increase in Unbelief

By Freddy Davis

Mike Johnson has recently been elected to the position of Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. In ascending to this position, he has been very outspoken concerning his faith in Jesus Christ. He has given God credit for his rise to the position, has stated that his worldview beliefs come from the Bible, and has been seen openly praying with fellow Republican lawmakers on the House floor.

While conservative leaders have praised Johnson for his faithfulness, many on the left have been strongly critical. Syracuse University law professor, David Cay Johnston, said, "GOP members praying on the House floor offends both our Constitution and the New Testament." Lucia Grosaru, clinical psychologist, psychotherapist, and assertiveness advocate, said, "When a country is ruled based on religious principles, you get the extremism that managed to survive through the millennia. Irrational beliefs should not inspire social policies. Mythology is to be studied but has no active place in modern societies." And then there is Jen Psaki – former press secretary for president Joe Biden. She said, "Most Americans might not be able to pick Mike Johnson out of a lineup, but in reality he's far from benign. It's not just his political ideology that should scare us. Johnson is basically a Christian fundamentalist."

The shift in America's faith environment has been well documented. The Gallop organization, Pew Research, and George Barna have all done polling on the beliefs of Americans for quite a number of years, and all of them show the dramatic shift

from the overwhelming majority self-identifying as Christian, to now over 30% claiming they have no religious affiliation. Most of this 30%, now commonly referred to as "Nones," consider themselves to be nonreligious and primarily, though not exclusively, identify as Atheist or Agnostic.

Religious or Not Religious?

But are these people really nonreligious? The truth is, they are very religious – they just don't understand how to identify their religious faith.

The most precise way to identify a religious faith is to use worldview concepts. A worldview is defined as: The assumptions people make about the nature of reality. The word "assumptions" in the definition gives it away. Assumptions are beliefs, so are automatically in the arena of faith – that is, religion.

The way to identify the beliefs of any faith system is to answer three particular questions based on the doctrines of that belief system. The three essential worldview questions are:

1. What is the nature of ultimate reality?
2. What is a human being?
3. What is the ultimate a person can get from this life (and how do they get it)?

There are four categories of worldviews, and every religion, cult, and philosophy in existence is some expression of these four. The four are:

- Naturalism
- Animism
- Far Eastern Thought (FET)
- Theism

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Naturalism is the belief that the natural universe, operating by natural laws, is all that exists. Atheists, Agnostics, Marxists, Secular Humanists, and the like fall into this category.

Animism is the belief that there is a single reality, but it is divided into two parts – the material world and the spirit world. Animists believe that the two parts interact with each other in a symbiotic relationship – that is, what happens in one part affects what happens in the other. Religions that fall into this category include Wicca, Astrology, Voodoo, Japanese Shinto, Native American religions, and more.

Far Eastern Thought, more technically referred to as pantheistic monism, conceives of ultimate reality as a transcendent, impersonal, and immaterial life force. It is believed that parts of this life force have spun off of the main body and gotten far enough away from it that it has taken on an entirely different character – one that is personal and material (the natural universe). These pieces of the life force, then, are working their way back to rejoin the transcendent main body through the process of reincarnation activated by karma. FET religions include Hinduism, Buddhism, Hare Krishna, Transcendental Meditation, and others.

Theism is the belief that an objectively real God exists who created the natural universe and mankind. God has, then, revealed Himself and His ways to mankind through various means. Theistic religions include Christianity, Judaism, Islam, The Way International, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, and the like.

How People's "Unbelief" Is Played out in Society

While there are four worldview categories, as we saw above, our fo-

cus here is on Naturalism. This is the category where we find the "Nones." There are some very interesting manifestations of this shift in the American religious landscape. Some of these are expressed in the motivations these people have as they push God aside. Others are expressed in the actions they take as they live out their daily lives.

They Don't like Organized Religion

One of the more common ways people express their denial of God is by rejecting "organized religion." Most commonly, people who have this mindset define organized religion as an affiliation with Christian churches or denominations. More specifically, they tend not to like the leaders, politics, or the social stances of existing churches. They will often point to, as their reasons for rejecting established churches, the moral and ethical failures of particular well known church leaders, the political infighting that goes on in many denominational and church organizations, or the moral stances against abortion and gay marriage.

Generally speaking, the people who fit into the "Nones" category are thought to be mostly Atheists and Agnostics, and certainly a large percentage are. However, it also includes many who consider themselves "spiritual" while rejecting what they call "religion." These often get their spirituality by getting close to nature, or trying to tap into karma or the energy of crystals. Essentially, they are people who want to be able to make up their own morality, rather than be subject to that which is taught by established religious institutions.

They Try to Satisfy Spiritual Feelings Through Fake Christian Churches

There are a lot of churches these days that contain the name Christian, or at least consider themselves Christian, but which don't follow biblical teachings. Many who attend these churches

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Contact Information

If you wish to contact us directly, you may do so by the following methods:

321 Anton Dr., Tallahassee, FL 32312

E-mail:

info@marketfaith.org

Phone: 850-383-9756 (Tallahassee, Florida)

Fax: 850-514-4571

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don't want to follow the Bible's teachings, but still want to be associated with the Christian faith. ProgressiveChristianity.org is an organization that represents the values of many of these churches. They have identified five core values that express their beliefs. They:

1. Believe that following the way and teachings of Jesus can lead to experiencing sacredness, wholeness, and unity of all life, even as we recognize that the Spirit moves in beneficial ways in many faith traditions.

2. Seek community that is inclusive of all people, honoring differences in theological perspective, age, race, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, class, or ability.

3. Strive for peace and justice among all people, knowing that behaving with compassion and selfless love towards one another is the fullest expression of what we believe.

4. Embrace the insights of contemporary science and strive to protect the Earth and ensure its integrity and sustainability.

5. Commit to a path of life-long learning, believing there is more value in questioning than in absolutes.

So the stated values represented include: following the way and teachings of their image of Jesus, belief that other religions are legitimate faith expressions, inclusivity of all beliefs and lifestyles, promotion of peace and justice, embrace of science, protection of the earth, and a rejection of absolute moral values. There is not a word about biblical salvation. These people may claim to be Christians, but by advocating beliefs and values that contradict the teachings of the Bible, they are not actually Christians. And, by default, they end up with the same essential beliefs as those who identify as "Nones".

They Try to Satisfy Spiritual Feelings Through Secular Channels

Another group that has rebelled against the Christian faith doesn't care to be associated at all with Christianity, but they still acknowledge spiritual feelings and a need for community. As a result, some of them have sought out a religious community that is not a religious community. They have migrated to what they consider secular organizations that have deliberately organized to function like a church, but without an easily identifiable theology. Groups such as Secular Humanists, Unitarian Universalists, and The Alliance for Responsible Citizenship fit into this category.

These folks have formed legal organizations and offer a form of community engagement. At the same time, they don't believe Christianity is true. They attempt to find moral clarity through many different religious traditions, but take the principles completely out of a traditional religious context.

They Enter Religious Careers under False Pretenses

There is another group who also don't believe that Christianity is true, but feel some kind of compulsion to actually lead out as if they were religious people. Many of them attend liberal theological schools and adopt various liberal theologies. They move from there to become institutional chaplains and church pastors. One of the more famous Atheist pastors these days is Gretta Vosper, a pastor in the United Church of Canada. And the current head chaplain at Harvard University is an Atheist.

The "Nones" Have Beliefs

As we look at those who are referred to as "Nones," we are not only looking at people who have left the Christian faith, but we are witnessing a massive societal shift away from the traditional beliefs and values that

have represented American society from its inception. And in talking to and reading about these people, their most prominent self-characterization is that they do not have religious beliefs.

But that is simply not true. They have not given up religious beliefs at all. What many people refer to as the increase in unbelief is not really an increase in unbelief. Rather, it is the rejection of one faith system and acceptance of a different one.

So how do we know that these Nones are not really nonreligious? We get at this by discovering how they answer the three essential worldview questions that were mentioned above. When we discover that information, the religious nature of their beliefs become obvious.

1. What is the nature of ultimate reality? - Ultimate reality consists of the natural universe operating by natural laws.

2. What is a human being? - Human beings are naturally evolved animal creatures.

3. What is the ultimate a person can get from this life (and how do they get it)? - On a macro level, the ultimate a person can get out of this life is survival. On a personal level, it is to maximize the accomplishment of one's personal desires – and they achieve this by doing whatever they feel necessary to pull it off.

As can be easily seen, none of the answers to these questions can be derived by any kind of empirical inquiry – that is, they cannot be answered by science. They are beliefs that must, ultimately, be believed by faith. Thus, Naturalism is a religious belief.

The reason so many people who follow it consider themselves nonreligious is not because they are really nonreligious, but because their beliefs fall into a category that does not fit their predetermined concept of religion. Most tend to identify their faith as a "philosophy" rather than a religion. But it is a faith point of view, just the same, and is a distinction without a difference.

So what do we have here? What is touted as an increase in "unbelief" is not really an increase in unbelief. It is, rather, a shift from one religious faith to another. They have shifted from belief in God to belief that God does not exist. These are people who are actually religious zealots and are actively promoting their naturalistic faith while pushing against a different faith.

So, when people criticize Mike Johnson for expressing his faith in public, they are doing it as a means of suppressing his beliefs so that their beliefs can become more prominent. There really is not an increase in unbelief at all.

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