

Religiously Unaffiliated Hard to Identify, Define

Fifty-two years ago - can it be? - I published "The Infidel: Freethought and American Religion," and have been tracking "the infidel" ever since.

Whether he or she was dubbed "free-thinker," "agnostic," "atheist," "secularist" or many things more, "the infidel" thrived on the reaction of the "religious" majority.

By publishing date in 1961, "the infidel" had gone off center stage, and scholarly colleagues and I had to ponder what "the religiofication" (as scholar Eric Hoffer called it) of American culture would mean. Infidels not only "went," from time to time they "came." Again.

In recent years, opinion surveys, pop culture and scholarly literature have discovered the unmistakable presence of the current round of "infidels."

The term of choice currently is "the religiously unaffiliated," a very relaxed term which suggests that "religion" equals "affiliation."

Unsatisfied with that big-tent designation, opinion surveyors have helpfully studied and redefined subgroups in the category. One of the most popular sources finds and names three subcategories.

The American Values Survey [looked](#) at the 19 percent of the population which was "unaffiliated" and found that almost one-fourth of these were "unattached believers," over one-third were "self-identified atheists and agnostics" and almost 40 percent were simply (well, sometimes maybe complexly) "unaffiliated secular Americans," not "secularists."

Columnists, like authors of "Sightings," mine these surveys and use their findings to assess spiritual life in today's America, often as a step in comparing these to

other situations around the globe, especially in the southern world - Africa, Latin America and the Asian subcontinent - where religious affiliation grows.

The most recent [mining](#) was by Daniel Cox in the Huffington Post. Cox and others turned the question into one of class, and dozens of posts were written by people who took it from there.

Needless to say, connecting “class” with affiliation or religious involvement/non-involvement is difficult, as Cox himself recognizes.

He and other surveyors and commentators have to make guesses or pursue correlations to other surveys to do some identifying, especially of the “atheist and agnostic” minority.

Many private posters, as is often the case on the Internet, are not given to nuance or dialogue. They blast.

Some are sure that the number of agnostics and atheists has grown because the population of the higher-educated camp has grown, and - doesn't everyone know? - higher education purges ignorance. Thus, the ranks of the unbelievers grow.

Cox and the authors of the American Values Survey do share the understanding that higher education, as now pursued, does cut into the ranks of believers.

But, they and others do not find simple and consistent correlations, and they adduce other evidences for and against religious belief and practice in a complex culture. In our current cultural episode, debates will increase.

Were I an opinion surveyor, I'd try to assess the degree to which something as simple as “indifference” to theological, religious, philosophical and communal claims and commitments prevail.

Thoughtful religious leaders have to work to promote affiliation and commitment as they seek and sometimes find company among the nonreligious who would stir interest in the deeper things of life.

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This is a mission for them in a time when gloss is favored in many subcultures.

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