

## WHAT TO DO ABOUT AMERICA’S NONES

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The marked growth of the Religiously Unaffiliated (the so-called “Nones”) in the United States is a well-known fact. The topic made the headlines in the States in 2016 when it was reported that 21 percent of Americans fall in this category. The most recent Pew Research Center study found the number was 26 percent! These are striking statistics, given the fact that in the 1950s only 2 percent of Americans fit in this category, and even in the 1970s it was only descriptive of 10 percent of the population.<sup>1</sup> The situation in Canada is not much different, though perhaps it is a little more dire. A 2018 Pew Research Center survey found that 29 percent of Canadians consider themselves religiously unaffiliated.<sup>2</sup> Of course the situation in Canada is perhaps not as surprising as it is in the United States. We have always assumed that Canada tends to be more secular than the States. These intuitions are confirmed by an earlier 2017 Pew Research study, which found 53 percent of Americans and only 27 percent in Canada report that religion is very important.<sup>3</sup> Given similar levels of Nones in the populations, and despite the aforementioned differences, an analysis of why there is significant growth of the religiously unaffiliated in the States, and what to do about it could have some relevance to and for the Canadian context.

1. DeJong, “Protestants Decline,” n.p.; Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” n.p.

2. Lipka, “5 Facts About Religion in Canada,” n.p. See Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme, *None of the Above*, for similar data based on 2016 polls.

3. Pew Research Center, “Why Do Levels of Religious Observance Vary by Age and Country?” n.p.

In a nutshell, the message of this article is that Christians need to wake up. The Centre for Post-Christendom Studies is correct; we do indeed live in a Post-Christendom ethos. And that means we need new models for Christian outreach. The models that have dominated in European theology and church life for nearly two centuries, and had influence in the States for more than three-quarters of a century (even longer in Canada) are not working. The belief that we can best address secularist trends as Christians by reinterpreting the faith in light of these trends and yearnings effectively trivializes the Christian worldview, makes it just another (not very interesting) option in the marketplace of lifestyle options. The first step in understanding the situation in the States is to come to terms with how it happened and how that has impacted what the Nones believe.

*The Religiously Unaffiliated in America: How Come?*

Whole books have been written to explain the marked growth of the religiously unaffiliated (in fact, I have just written one myself).<sup>4</sup> Famed sociologist Peter Berger's analysis written 60 years ago remains relevant for our context. This analysis is also in line with the more recent reflections of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. Their bottom line is that secularism is a process that makes it plausible not to view all aspects of life as dependent on God. And because we are social creatures, this entails that the process has a subjective side which includes the secularizing of our consciousness. In short, secularization is nothing more than the process of society coming to see belief in God as just one option among many.<sup>5</sup>

A survey of recent American history and a casual consideration of the norms of American pop culture make it apparent that the US (like Canada) has been progressively secularized in this sense since the impact of German Enlightenment thinking on its elite

4. See Ellingsen, *Ever Hear of Feuerbach?* Other very different assessments include White, *The Rise of the Nones*; Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*.

5. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, esp. pp. 107–8 and Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

universities since World War II.<sup>6</sup> Ever since Immanuel Kant's revolutionary "turn to the subject," scholars in this tradition, among them the founders of the social sciences and critical historiography, have undermined the concept of absolute, descriptive truth in favor of a relativism of values in which everything is equal as long as it is not enforced, and the elite can subjectively create their own values based on their estimate of what is most satisfying or "healthy."<sup>7</sup>

Consider how this philosophy, which also marginalizes religion, undergirds American pop culture today. The iconic Broadway Show, "Hamilton," tells the story of early America without any attention to religion, except when Alexander Hamilton finds therapeutic enrichment in hard times. No mention is made of his grappling with the Christian core of America in *The Federalist Papers* (#69), and James Madison's dialogue with Christian concepts and the faithful throughout the document (#10, #51, #57) is overlooked.

As long ago as when the earliest Baby Boomers were being educated in American schools (the late 1950s and early 1960s) it was possible to learn Colonial American History in public schools and learn nothing of the Pilgrims' religious commitments and how those convictions have impacted life in the New England Colonies or the Constitutional system. The impacts of the Second Great Awakening on the Abolitionist Movement are not subjects in most American History classes (not even at the undergraduate level).

The most watched American television shows of 2020, from police shows like "FBI" and "Chicago PD," to the doctors' shows like "Chicago Med," and reality TV portray images of the good life without reference to religious faith. Worldviews at odds with Christian values make their way into the movies and television and embed in the social psyche, like the comments of Michael Douglas as Gordon Gekko in the 1987 movie "Wall Street":

6. For this observation I am indebted to Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 146–56.

7. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 41–42; and Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy of History of Mankind*, 41, 47. For this analysis, see Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 150–56.

“Greed . . . is good.” Journey’s 1986 hit “Be Good to Yourself” is a mantra for Americans today. It fits so well the therapeutic ethos which began to saturate the American social psyche along with the values-relativism of the German Enlightenment scholars we have noted. It is a thin line to move from an awareness of our anxiety and the need for counseling in order to facilitate the good life to today’s common usage of phrases in America like “identity crisis,” “defense mechanisms,” “midlife crises,” and “burned out.”<sup>8</sup>

The therapeutic environment in America counsels individuals to find contentment, to express their feelings, and not to let anything, not even values and binding commitments, get in the way. The special uniqueness of the individual and the validity of his/her unique feelings are prioritized. The media has been promulgating these viewpoints, and all the while the idea of “common sense” embedded in American institutions has taken a hit.<sup>9</sup> Barna Research Group reported in 2017 that 44 percent of Americans regard truth as something felt or relative, and now only 35 percent of us say it is absolute.<sup>10</sup>

The idea that each of us has unique perspectives and tastes is basic to the American (and perhaps Canadian) experience since World War II. The business world is built on these assumptions with its strategies of niche marketing. American business capitalized on cultivating among Baby Boomers their own unique tastes unlike their elders—like Rock and Roll and 60s-lifestyle tastes in drugs, sex, and clothes. Now we niche market to every succeeding generation and group. Less and less, then, do Americans of different ages and backgrounds share common tastes or values. Business and the media thrive on the subjectivism and relativism taught by the academy.<sup>11</sup>

Internet connectivity has played a significant role in further subjectivizing and individualizing American life. For all the praise of connectivity, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated what

8. Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*; and Freud, *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, 77–78.

9. Reid, “Essays on the Intellectual Power of Man,” 263; and Reid, “Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense,” 137–38, 144.

10. Barna Group, *Barna Trends 2018*.

11. For these observations, see Sosnik et al., *Applebee’s America*, 160–61.

analysts had been telling us: that life on the internet is isolating and does not make for happiness. Even prior to the pandemic, researchers had noted how use of the internet was invading on personal relationships. People could be seen ignoring their companions or those at mealtime to catch up on the latest internet communication or entertainment opportunity. But heavy use of the internet seems to isolate us from social interaction and the happiness that goes with it in another way. Neurobiologists are noting that excessive use of the internet erodes concentration, and the neurobiology noted in the next paragraph confirms that such excessive use also erodes the parts of the brain which govern such interaction and happiness.<sup>12</sup>

It seems that social connection and happiness are functions of the brain's prefrontal cortex. This part of the brain is its executive function. It keeps in check our animal instincts, the parts of our brain which give rise to fear and fight-or-flight instincts. You need to keep these instincts in check when you are sociable. For friendship you need good manners, not the latest emotions. In addition, nature has wired this executive part of our brain for use, and so we are rewarded when it functions. A pleasant-feeling brain chemical (monoamine) called dopamine is secreted and transmitted to the entire brain. And it seems that dopamine is also associated with sociality.<sup>13</sup>

Since computer usage diminishes these dynamics, it follows that if we use it heavily, we will be inclined toward less sociality, more individualism, and a little less happiness. This is just another example of how our present realities dispose Americans towards evaluating and thinking of everything, including religion, in light of the individual and his or her needs. Heavy computer usage also seems to have a negative impact on our sense of transcendence, as the prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain most active in

12. Small et al., "Brain Health Consequences of Digital Technology Use," 179–87; Brad et al., "Prefrontal Control and Internet Addiction," n.p.

13. Carr, *The Shallows*, 116–17, 121–22, 168–69, 213–14, 219–22; Amen, *Change Your Brain, Change Your Life*, 81, 140–41; Immordino-Yang et al., "Neural Correlates of Admiration and Compassion," 8021–26.

spirituality, so diminish use of that part of the brain and you are less open to spirituality.<sup>14</sup>

It is obvious how all the recent cultural strands in America (and throughout much of Western society) have created an ethos making the growth of the Nones possible, if not more likely. The combination of secularism (creating cultural spaces in which religion is just one option among many), customization of products allowing for niches, individualism, and a therapeutic mindset all combine to lead people to hear religious claims as just the articulation of what certain people find good for themselves, proposing a lifestyle option that is not very interesting or not much different than what you can have without it. Now that we have explored how America has gotten to where it is, let us now talk about who the Nones are and what they think.

*Who Are the Nones and What Do They Think?*

Surveys tell us that if you are a None in America you are most likely a young White male. Polls tell us that 68 percent of America's Nones are White, perhaps as many as 68 percent are male, and nearly 70 percent were born since 1980.<sup>15</sup> Very few are outright atheists (just 31 percent as of 2014) but seem to have some sense of spiritual realities.<sup>16</sup> The optimism about human nature, our essential goodness, and individualism that characterizes much of American society is very much on display in the thinking of the Nones. Human beings need no crutches. We can handle it all ourselves. The Nones generally seek to handle things with a leftward drift, advocating the policies of liberal Democrats.<sup>17</sup> Their

14. Newberg et al., *Why God Won't Go Away*; Davidson et al., "Alterations in Brain and Immune Function Produced by Mindfulness Meditation," 121–23.

15. For specific ratios, see Cooper et al., "Exodus," n.p.; Lipka, "A Closer Look at America's Rapidly Growing Religious 'Nones,'" n.p.; Lipka, "10 Facts About Atheists," n.p.

16. Lipka, "A Closer Look at America's Rapidly Growing Religious 'Nones,'" n.p.

17. See Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders*, 132–92; Lipka, "10 facts about atheists," n.p. See Smietana, "Most Americans Admit They're Sinners,"

individualism surfaces in the fact that like most Americans (58 percent) there is a sense among spiritual Nones that worshipping alone or with one's family is as good as regular church worship.<sup>18</sup> A 2017 poll found that Nones are less oriented toward finding meaning in family than Christians and the public in general. Atheists, but not those Nones open to spirituality, may find more value in money and hobbies than Christians and the general public.<sup>19</sup>

We also gain insights about why the Nones became Nones from several surveys. It seems that only 1 in 5 left the Church over a bad worship experience. The biggest reason for leaving religion, they say, is that they just stopped believing (60 percent) but also 32 percent note their family was never religious when they were growing up. Related factors pertain to those raised by divorced parents and in religiously-mixed households are more likely by 10 to 12 percentage points to become Nones.<sup>20</sup> Another statistical characteristic of the Nones, with implications for Christian outreach to them, is that dislike of religious organizations is not high. Only 34 percent of the spiritual but not religious among them have those feelings, according to a 2017 Pew Research Center survey. And in that group only 26 percent find religion irrelevant (79 percent still believe in God) and among agnostic Nones, the numbers are only 40 percent for irrelevancy and 63 percent believing in God.<sup>21</sup>

It is clear that we have some interesting data about the Nones. What are American churches doing about them? What Christian perspective can best address the Nones' worldviews and growth? This article addresses these questions in the following sections.

n.p. On the Nones' liberalism, see Connaughton, "Religiously Unaffiliated people more likely than those with a religion to lean left accept homosexuality," n.p.

18. Weber, "Christian, What Do you Believe?" n.p.

19. As reported in Lipka, "10 facts about atheists," n.p.

20. Cooper et al., "Exodus," n.p.

21. As reported in Pew Research Center, "Why America's 'nones' don't identify with a religion," n.p.

*What the American Churches Are [Not] Doing About It:  
Business and Theology as Usual*

The title of this section succinctly summarizes my thesis. In research for a new book on the subject of this article, I found that mainline American Christianity does not seem visibly concerned about the dynamics of the growth of Nones. It is pretty much business as usual in the mainline denominational headquarters. In a survey of mainline American denominational headquarters that I undertook for my new book, *Ever Hear of Feuerbach? That's Why American and European Christianity Are in Such a Funk!*, I found that none of these denominations has created an office to address the growth of the Nones. It is basically business as usual in these denominational offices, while their resources keep eroding. Granted, there is a lot of talk about the need to make faith more relevant to our situation. But that has been the agenda since the 1960s, even back to the 1950s. It is the rhetoric you use to critique your denominational traditions that you do not like. And it is also true that four of the mainline denominations (Presbyterian Church [USA], The Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and Christian Church [Disciples of Christ]) have developed programs that aim to do evangelism more effectively among the Millennial Generation in ways that are appealing to the Millennial ethos. But these programs continue to trade on the prevailing theological models which have dominated in the American mainline since World War II, if not before.

What is the prevailing theological approach? What American theologian Hans Frei contended in the late 1960s is still most relevant. He wrote: "the story of modern theology . . . has been almost exclusively apologetical, and the main focus has been anthropology."<sup>22</sup> To that he might have added that most of them opt for an optimistic view of human nature, though not of human society (those using Existentialism being perhaps the exception).

It is not surprising that this apologetic model rooted in human experience should dominate in the century or more since the secularization process began to gather steam in Western society. Peter

22. Frei, *Theology & Narrative*, 27.



Berger, in his analysis of secularism, already suggested that what has happened in the churches would happen. He contended that as society gets secularized, so Christianity must be secularized in order to make it attractive to the emerging secularized consciousness, which is effectively posited as a non-negotiable good. As a result, Christian truth becomes consumer-controlled (“anthropological” in Frei’s sense).<sup>23</sup> Berger nicely elaborated on the implications of these commitments:

This means, furthermore that a dynamic element is introduced into the situation, a principle of changeability if not change that is intrinsically inimical to religious traditionalism. In other words, in this situation it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the traditions as unchanging verity. Instead, the dynamics of consumer preference is introduced into the religious sphere. Religious contents become subjects of “fashion.”<sup>24</sup>

In Berger’s view, another consequence of the churches’ reactions to secularizing trends is that in marketing the gospel it becomes important to focus on its therapeutic value.<sup>25</sup> This clearly harmonizes with why the rooting of religious claims in human consciousness has become the dominant way of doing theology in the West.

Essentially, the secularizing process of which the growth of the Nones is part, seems to have prodded churches into theological models that root faith in human experience, offering a worldview which meets our needs. This commitment was markedly on display in the American mainline churches’ reactions to COVID-19—with church leaders not just suggesting but actually *demanding* the cancellation of corporate worship while it was still deemed fine to shop. The call to worship of the Commandments about honoring God or the Sabbath were reinterpreted/ignored in light of the overall demand for health when worship could have been often conducted safely out of doors. Of course, with a theological perspective that lets the culture and its passion for individualism set the agenda (polls indicate that a majority of American adults

23. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 147–48.

24. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 145–46.

25. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 147.

[58 percent] believe that worshipping alone or with one's family is a valid replacement for regularly attending church, and only 30 percent disagree) church leaders have plenty of cover for their directives.<sup>26</sup> No matter if such advice was not heeded in the Church's tradition by the Martyrs (who certainly did not prioritize health) or if there will be long-term consequences for losing members or nurturing young people who now know that corporate worship is optional.

When you operate in these ways, and let influential worldviews set the agenda for faith, the transcendence or Otherness of God and faith, along with their call for absolute submission, get lost. And when you do that you miss the warning of sociologist Phil Zuckerman when he observes that if something is "religious" it has to preserve elements of the transcendence, of the supernatural.<sup>27</sup> Lose transcendence and you do not have religion, he seems to claim. Is that the problem we face today: that the dominant strands of theology are not religious enough to appeal to the Nones and others caught up in secularism? Is the problem that the Church is not really offering an alternative to secularism, but just less interesting secular options?

This is where the nineteenth-century German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach is relevant. His claim that religion is nothing more than human experience is the way most modern secularists and the Nones in particular hear Christian teaching.<sup>28</sup> And if the Church cannot present a version of Christianity that can avoid that conclusion, any outreach to the Nones will not stand a chance of genuinely engaging them. Faith is not something worthy of attention for the Nones. It is just somebody else's opinion, from their point of view. If Christianity is going to get a hearing in our context, in which most everyone hears Christian claims in terms of Feuerbachian presuppositions about them being nothing more than

26. Weber, "Christian, What Do you Believe?" n.p. I do not question the good intentions of the mainline church leaders in the United States who made live corporate worship optional, but their well-intentioned directives and actions have been unwittingly conditioned by their propensity to let the cultural winds shape their ministries.

27. Zuckerman, *Society Without God*, 191.

28. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 14.

human wish-fulfillment, then such Christian affirmations must be able to stand as authoritative claims on people's lives, in order to be a real alternative to our feel-good individualism. We need to become aware that our experience leaves us in want, that it is not all there is to life (that we live in a flawed sinful condition), in order to have a sense of transcendence and our need for it. These conclusions seem borne out by the very fact that theologically-conservative churches that do not root faith in human experience like their mainline cousins do (I refer here to the Evangelical Movement, churches of the Southern Hemisphere, the Black church in America) have not taken membership hits like the mainline churches have.

*Theology for a New Outreach*

What does an attractive alternative look like? Not surprisingly, if we need to endorse a theological position that affirms divine transcendence and does not root the Word of God in human experience, the model for outreach that I propose looks a little like Karl Barth's approach and the Postliberal, Biblical Narrative Theology of some of his followers in the late-twentieth century at Yale University.<sup>29</sup> All of these approaches assert, with Evangelicals and the Black church, that the Word of God stands over against the individual. The Word has authority in my proposal and the Black church's hermeneutical traditions because it does not just tell us about God and Jesus Christ. We actually encounter him in the Word, like you really encounter the missing loved one in telling good stories about him or her. On these grounds, the Word of God does not depend on being rooted in some foundational principle or experience for its credibility. Human experience is not all that good; it is flawed. It cannot be the basis for experiencing God. Such a theological perspective must face challenges to its credibility. How do we avoid the scepter of a fundamentalistic biblicism or blind fideism?

29. Barth, "An Introductory Essay," x-xxxii; Frei, *Theology & Narrative*; and Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*.

The lesson that Barth teaches us is the reminder that theology is a science. Of course, it does not conform to the measurement of other sciences. But it functions like a science.<sup>30</sup> This appeal to its scientific character is more likely to get attention in our secular ethos. Because for all our relativism and subjectivism, secularists tend to defer to science, giving it a privileged role in deciding factual questions. Consider the trust that the American educational establishment has placed in science with its insistence on prioritizing STEM courses (science, technology, engineering, and math).<sup>31</sup> Theology as science makes more sense in our ethos than theology as psychology or some other formula.

In making this claim we need to be sure we understand what scientists today say science is. Science, especially in the field of Quantum Mechanics, recognizes that it does not and cannot have all the answers. No less an eminent geneticist than Francis Collins has contended that science recognizes that it is limited to its own sphere of investigation. It does not provide a full-blown worldview. The quantum physicist focuses on the internal makeup of the atom and is not working with the human brain like a neurobiologist is. But of course, there can be an overlap of interests and findings from time to time. Likewise, science in general is concerned with the dynamics of what is happening, but is less equipped to answer questions of their meaning or why they happened.<sup>32</sup> This opens the door on scientific grounds in principle to allow for aesthetic and religious truths. The claims of the Bible might be true, even if not strictly speaking biologically or historically verifiable. And yet there can be an overlap of interests at times, such that we can speak of faith having scientific or historical implications.

How then can theology operate as a science? In the strict sense of being a physical science, it is not one. But it might be and has been conducted in such a way as to operate scientifically. How does science operate? No less eminent a scientist than Stephen

30. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1:1–9.

31. Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, 4; Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 13–16, 91–109; and Wilson, *Consilience*.

32. Giberson and Collins, *The Language of Science and Faith*, 107–8.

Hawking and many others have observed that our old thinking of science as a discipline, which inductively and empirically proves theories, is off base. Rather, certain formal agreements or paradigms guide research and study of data. In that sense, they emerge prior to “proof,” though data observed informally may suggest them from the start. Like the atomic theory, for example, or the theory of gravity, these paradigms continue to be presupposed until they can no longer account for new data or support research.<sup>33</sup> In short, the scientific method does not so much “prove” theories as it disproves incorrect ones. In order to be true, a claim must be testable, capable of disproof.

Karl Barth and his heirs who reject rooting faith in some foundational human experiences propose theological models that are in principle scientific in these ways. It is committed to testing its language in relation to the Word of God, and its research is accountable only to this paradigm. Likewise, theories about atoms and molecules as strings set the agenda for research in physics and the research data is interpreted in light of these paradigms. Actually, just as sight is not a valid criterion for determining the existence of molecules in Quantum Physics and their string-like character in String Theory, so visibility or lack of it is irrelevant for determining the truth of Christian claims about God or Jesus’ miracles. All sciences, including theology, are in Barth’s words “accountable for this path to itself” and “it cannot at the same time take over the obligation to submit to measurement by the canons valid for other sciences.”<sup>34</sup> An important American proponent of Barth’s, Robert Jenson, claimed that

We must summon the audacity to say that modernity’s scientific/metaphysical metanarrative . . . is not the encompassing story within which all other accounts of reality within which all other accounts of reality must establish their places, or be discredited by failing to find one. It is instead a brutal abstraction from reality. . . . It is time for the church simply to reply: . . . the tale told by Scripture is too comprehensive to find place within so drastically curtailed a vision of the facts. Indeed

33. Hawking and Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, 46, 172; cf. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 9–10, 36–110, 145.

34. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1:7, 9.

the gospel story cannot fit within *any* other would-be meta-narrative because it is itself the only true metanarrative—or it is altogether false.<sup>35</sup>

Theology, like any scientific discipline, determines its own agenda and standards of truth in the discipline. The truth of a scientific discipline is not found in the beauty of its equations, but in its logic and correspondence with data. (Of course, we can refer to a mathematical beauty of the equations and dialogue can transpire with an artist about whether they are in fact beautiful.) So, likewise, the truth of Christian faith is not found in its correspondence to the theory of evolution or even in many cases its historicity by the canons of historical criticism, but in its ability to represent the biblical witness. (Of course, there may be times when a dialogue with a scientist about compatibility between the resurrection accounts and historical facts is appropriate.)

Jenson's last point, also made by some of the Postliberal theologians, is essential for establishing the scientific character of theology. Theology is not a science if all truth is only internal to the discipline. A discipline is not scientific if it cannot be falsified by testing.<sup>36</sup> For example, in order to be scientific, a theological model like I and my allies propose must be open to being discredited if evidence could be found to demonstrate that Jesus did not in fact rise from the dead (as 1 Cor 15:17 testifies). Adherence to the biblical witness demands that the Christian claim about Jesus' Resurrection be falsifiable. Likewise, since the Word of God functions to absorb our world (what Jenson calls the metanarrative into which everything else in life fits), if Christian faith could be shown to not effectively form our lives, to help people live effectively and well, that might count as evidence against its truth. But in the interim, in view of how well things have worked out for societies in which Christendom was established, in view of poll data indicating regular worshippers are happier than the general public,

35. Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, 120.

36. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 138; Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 118, 165.

barring the production of counter-evidence, could a case be made for continuing to posit the truth of Christianity?<sup>37</sup>

The theological model I have been describing clearly presents Christian faith in a credible way as a genuine alternative to the secularized consciousness of the Nones. It almost presents a counter-cultural vision compared to modern American/Western culture. Everything in the world of the Nones points towards solitude, individuality, flexibility, optimism about what we can accomplish, and is about self-fulfillment and well-being. While the gospel on this model offers real-life community and community gatherings (unless your concern about health keeps you away), a life of sacrifice and cross-bearing, a life of continuity with the broader historic community, and a sense of belonging. Accompanied by a strong sense of human sinfulness because we cannot trust ourselves, the theological model I propose claims that the Word of God subsumes our world and experience to it, positing a transcendent vision of God, not subsumed to our experience. Contrary to the optimism of the Nones, this is a worldview that gets us away from ourselves to focus on transcendence, a real counter-cultural option.

The authority of such a Word almost recreates a kind of Christendom ethos which secularism seeks to undermine. It seems to nurture and endorse the kind of community solidarity which Christendom affords for Christian faith to thrive (at least a theological model which can help nurture among the faithful something like Christendom in small communities). As for the attractiveness of such counter-cultural aspects of this theological model, the sense in which it is a contradiction of the values in which the Nones were nurtured, it is worth noting that the Church seems to have functioned most effectively in history when it offered an alternative to the values dominating in high culture. Consider the period of the Martyrs, the Great Awakenings, the Black church in America, the Confessing Church in World War II-era Germany, the church in Eastern Europe in the 1960s through the 1980s, and the marked growth of the church in the Southern Hemisphere

37. As reported in *Pew Forum*, "Religion's Relationship to Happiness, Civic Engagement and Health Around the World," n.p.

since World War II. What is counter-cultural gets noted, and polls suggest that there is an attitude in today's American youth about "not caring what they [the establishment] think" which will make a counter-cultural version of the Christian faith most attractive.<sup>38</sup>

You cannot have this thumbs-down to the establishment version of faith, and you cannot present Christianity as a real alternative to our times, without a model of theology which is not heard as just another version of meeting human needs. A theology presented as a credible science, as offering authoritative facts in the discipline like I am suggesting in this article, has a better chance to offer effective outreach to the Nones and their friends than the failed prevailing alternative.<sup>39</sup>

### *Conclusion*

I hasten to add that I am not so naïve as to think that proposing a theology that operates like a science is going to solve all our problems, restore Christendom, and "rescue" or "save" the Nones. Even if I am correct in my analyses, the church (at least in America) will still need to do the sort of things that Rick Warren and other mega-church leaders learned from management consultant Peter Drucker—make gut-level connections, lead with authenticity and adaptability, engage in niche marketing, and nurture a sense of community and small groups with authentic navigators. There will also be a need to develop a rich array of programs in churches which are fun and enriching, perhaps those that target or give more responsibility to Millennials, as some researchers advise.<sup>40</sup> But the more we can get the theological model presented in this article embedded in the pulpits and denominational offices of America's churches, the less the kind of megachurch, successful business strategies just sketched will be needed. Americans (and Canadians) caught up in the world of the Bible and its authoritative Word,

38. For this sort of social analysis, see Twenge, *Generation Me*, 17–43.

39. For a fuller development of my theological model, see my *Ever Hear of Feuerbach?; A Common Sense Theology*; and "The Future of Evangelical Catholic Lutheran Witness," n.p.

40. Drucker, "Management Paradigms," n.p.



not hung up on whether it is relevant or not, are usually the most engaged and loyal followers of Christ, joyfully serving without any gimmicks. The theological model I have sketched to reach out to the Nones aims to increase the number of those caught up in the authority of the Word and meeting our Lord there.

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