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Suspicious Minds: The Spirituality of the Postmodern Nones

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America

SUSPICIOUS MINDS

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The spirituality of the postmodern nones

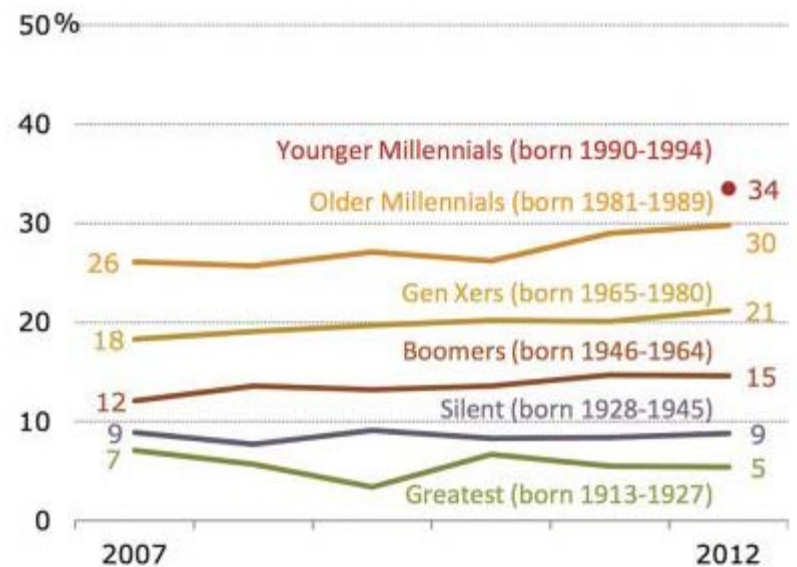
Much has been made about the “nones” and the current demographics of belief in the United States, especially those of young people. The term *nones* rose to prominence when a Pew Research Center poll in 2012 called “Nones on the Rise” discovered that nearly 20 percent of Americans claim no religious affiliation—a number that has been steadily climbing since 2007. Last January, National Public Radio aired a weeklong series titled “Losing Our Religion: The Growth of the nones.” In the spring of 2013, a poll conducted by Michael Hout of the University of California, Berkeley, and Mark A. Chaves of Duke University similarly found that religious affiliation in the United States is at its lowest point since it began to be tracked.

Other researchers do not accept that number. But what was not denied in these studies was the hyperactive rate at which “none” was being declared by members of the millennial generation—the cohort born between the early 1980s and late 1990s. The initial Pew survey found that nearly 32 percent of this group claims no religious affiliation. No doubt many readers of **America** are familiar with this signature phenomenon of Generation Y (there have been several articles about it in these pages); but, while much has been said about the topic of nones and religion, very little has been written about what might have begotten such thinking and about the intellectual context in which the religious opinions of nones were formed.

On what philosophical and theological food have nones made their meal? What rituals inform their spirituality? And what is it about organized religion that has left them cold? One argument is that the nones

Recent Trends in Affiliation, by Generation

% of each age cohort that is unaffiliated



Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2007-2012.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

are postmodern, and that consideration of the slippery but increasingly intelligible and even prophetic characteristics of postmodernism will not only help us describe the rise of the nones but may also reveal how postmodern postures of belief exhibit patterns that resonate with many of the practices that constitute and characterize Christian spirituality. Moreover, because this phenomenon has occurred in various forms before in history, the specific habits of Catholic thought and spirituality are not only in position to integrate such developments, but they can also provide fruitful pastoral responses as well.

As good postmodernists, nones are suspicious of claims made regarding absolute truth—and even more reticent about making such claims themselves. This often frustrates those who prize conviction and certitude above all else. Still, in matters of faith, such a posture is ostensibly one of openness and receptivity, and nones are nothing if not open and receptive. In this sense, the spirituality of the nones resonates more with St. Augustine’s pointed question, “What does anyone say when he speaks about You?” than it does with Richard Dawkins’s pointed declaration, “The idea of a divine creator belittles the elegant reality of the universe.”

Claiming that there are phenomena about which words will always fail is itself a conviction and certitude and has many of the earmarks of a major theological tradition in the church, the apophaticism of mystical theology, where the focus is “negative”—on what cannot be said about God, as opposed to what can be said. This is not to say that the nones are resurrecting the figures of Blessed Juliana of Norwich or St. John of the Cross and channeling them for contemporary culture, but they are onto something when they cast suspicion on those who make vital truth claims reflexively, unreflectively and even proudly. The nones who are spiritually open seem to be declaring, as Flannery O’Connor declared in 1962, “How incomprehensible God must necessarily be to be the God of heaven and earth. You can’t fit the Almighty into your intellectual categories.”

That said, many Catholics are worried that the church is dying and that these fickle nones—fed on the cuisine of postmodernism—are the harbingers of the disintegration. But the nones are saying no to much more than institutional religion; they are saying no to other institutional pillars of late modern American culture as well—perhaps because so many institutions are saying “no” to them. Kevin Sullivan, a Gen-Y Catholic, wrote in a recent article in *The Washington Post*, “The American political system is marred by incivility and dishonesty. The idols of our pop culture are arrested, embarrass themselves publicly and live lavishly.” Mr. Sullivan’s complaint could well include the moral failures involved in the savings and loan crisis of recent history, the corpse-cold versions of corporate culture and the disequilibrium of health care; and so we admit these to his critique by implication.

But Mr. Sullivan’s main message to his fellow Catholic millennials is the lament that their shared quest to find a vibrant faith life in their own church is becoming a fool’s errand. A church that lacks “the courage and joy to live, in essence, ‘counter-culturally’” and whose “timid response to the child abuse scandal and political division among our own bishops and religious orders has left many Catholic millennials timid themselves” is a church that itself requires correction, renewal and spiritual reinvigoration. In this context, millennial nones—indeed all of us—can welcome Pope Francis’ reminder that the “church is a love story, not an institution.” Moreover, Pope Francis, who is clearly the first pope of the millennial age, claims an important solidarity with the theological ethos of nones, a development that promises to bear much fruit. Pope Francis recognizes

that the nones and their no's, in ways consonant with a long tradition of sound spirituality, by and large affirm the Christian yes. But how can this be? We must turn to history for a brief account.

An Intellectual Genealogy

Speaking in terms of intellectual context, the nones are on a peculiar cusp. On the one hand, they are ardent practitioners of Enlightenment certainty; on the other, they are banner-wavers for the postmodern hermeneutics of suspicion. This ambivalence can come as no surprise. The Enlightenment provided a utopian panacea of sorts—the chance for perfectibility, the assertion of unlimited human improvement grounded in the discoveries gleaned by rational thought unfettered by neither the hard freight of history nor a remnant (and, as is oft-asserted, juvenile) belief in the airborne vagaries of theism. But it also revealed the limits of such cheap optimism, not to mention the boundaries and quandaries of human power.

The penchant among Westerners to view history in purely linear terms, as a cause and effect cascade of intellectual and technical progress, survived for a significant time; but this complacency was seriously called into question by the events of the first half of the 20th century, when it became clear that the fullest expression of rational thought was as often as not the manifestation of dark projects in injustice, violence and genocide. By 1945 traditional modes of reading history, already changing at a break-neck pace, shifted decisively to what Charles Taylor, in *A Secular Age*, calls “exclusive humanism.” By 1968 all was awash in a full-blown sea change, and humanistic disciplines were called to reorient their critical methodologies within fluctuating horizons and the rubrics of subjectivity and relativity. The implacable forces of human cultures—much more than the metaphysics of mere ideas—became embraced as critical shapers of history.

This is one thesis offered to describe, at least partially, the origins of postmodernism and the context in which the nones were raised. In a postmodern world, no longer did one large narrative of culture credibly describe, no longer did a single account of “salvation history” spiritually sustain, no longer did rational systems of thought—and the institutions they spawned—safeguard the values of liberty, justice and equality. No longer was it reasonable to propose or even desire such things, for to do so was naive, undiscerning and unimaginative. To do so was to violate and treat disrespectfully any notion of what was real, empirical and on the ground. How retrograde it is today to seek after the “big TOE” (Theory of Everything) for, if we are honest, what we see in the world are so many little, disconnected TOE's that claim multiplicity, indeterminacy, radical uniqueness and other exaltations of subjectivity. In the end, it is particularity, not the constructed universals of high fantasy, that describes the world more credibly. Raised in a context like this, is it any surprise that when asked to claim an absolute identity, they check the box, “None of the Above”?

An Affirmation of Negative Theology

The juggernaut of the nones reveals the completion of the Enlightenment, which displaces religion as a dominant force; but it also reveals the ways that one orthodoxy can be so easily replaced with another. Clearly, this can be disconcerting to both a culture that claims to value the coherence of the common good and a church that draws life from a fixed yet mysteriously dynamic mark. There is a bright side to all of this, however, especially when viewed against the very postmodern theology that provides the backdrop to these

remarks. As introduced above, it is difficult to offer a uniform description of postmodernism (there are various camps—some sympathetic to theism, others hostile); but one area on which there is consensus is the weakness of words—that some things are “unsayable”—especially when they purport to describe absolute phenomena like God, orthodoxy and the geographies of spiritual encounters. Still, any serious thinker knows that a thing that cannot be spoken of is ultimately a thing worth speaking about.

An entire vein of postmodern thinking speaks creatively about this in ways not lost on the ironic imagination. From the classic texts by Jacques Derrida (“How to Avoid Speaking”) and Emmanuel Levinas (his notion of “relation without relation,” his solidarity with the inscrutable other) to the primacy of passion-over-knowledge of John Caputo, to Richard Kearney’s notion of anatheism (God after God), postmodern approaches are suddenly not as novel or impenetrable as they first appeared. When Kearney observes how postmodern thought embraces “the appreciation of the mystical moment of nothingness that precedes the breakthrough to a mystical epiphany of renewal,” one hears the strong echo of the psalmist’s report from the frontier: “Be still and know that I am God.” In this way, postmodern thought can be read as a 21st-century version of an apophaticism that has long been part of the church. The humble reticence, in the face of divine majesty, to whisper *Adonai* (or nothing at all) instead of a proud *Yahweh*, the felt clarity of beholding the “cloud of unknowing,” the resolve to cultivate both the will and intellectual nimbleness required to abide in mystery—these are the proper rejoinders to the incomprehensible mystery of God.

Arguably, this is an optimistic reading of the nones; but it also discloses the ways that nones of a certain disposition, while they may be questioning toward organized religion, are neither swayed by other “religions” of contemporary culture—materialism, scientism or the utopian Shangri-La promised by the high priests of consumerism. More important, postmodern nones reject the idea that Enlightenment rationalism can account, in the final analysis, for transcendent or at least transcending values like personal dignity, heroism and human rights. In this sense, the penchant of postmodern nones to retreat into sanctuaries of indeterminacy and ambiguity can be viewed more as an act of intellectual receptiveness than indecision. In the face of the many linguistic difficulties that attend “God talk,” we would be well advised to mind our tongues and pray for humility when we sit at the foot of such resplendent phenomena.

An Ecclesial Existence 2.0

But there is work left to be done by the nones. Just as apophatic spirituality is ultimately a one-winged spirituality, so too, perhaps, is the reticent fence-sitting of the nones. Among others, C. S. Lewis observed that the apophatic is necessary because it cleanses us of our erroneous ideas about God so as to make a space for the revelation of “positive” (*kataphatic*) theology, the explosion of God’s incarnational presence upon the scene. There is a point in every life where one must respond to God’s perceived absence and reckon with the “traces” left behind, where one must make the Kierkegaardian leap or not. Put another way, as Daniel Lanois, an artist who dwells well in postmodern spaces observes, “He ain’t coming in ’til you lay the table.”

As Pelagian as this sounds, it suits the nones well, for they must confront their subjectivity—and the criticism that they are narcissists of the highest order living in the metastatic version of the “Me” generation. Fed on the porridge of “Sheilism” of the 1980s, described by the sociologist Robert Bellah and others (the term has

been used ever since to characterize the sui generis American approach to religion and spirituality), millennial nones would do well to heed the admonition of their peer, Kevin Sullivan, when he says: “Do not throw your hands up in the air and wait for the community we seek to form. Instead, try returning to the pews, this time with a friend. If we are truly to find our identity as a generation, we cannot keep living in a paradox of being accepting of others’ convictions and beliefs but denying ourselves our own.”

The church, then, becomes a real option for the nones, as it has for others in the past. The Catholic revival of the 20th century was largely an intellectual revival. It came on the heels of the 19th-century age of ideology and was populated and propelled by first class intellectuals: Jacques Maritain, Edith Stein, Christopher Dawson, among so many others. The renewal of the nones will be something else—something more culturally particular, something, perhaps, less universal. Faithful to postmodernist premises, this revival may be “unsayable”: more about actions and less about words. “You have been told, O mortal, what is good,/and what the LORD requires of you:/Only to do justice and to love goodness,/and to walk humbly with your God” says the prophet Micah, an exhortation that appeals to the ethos of Generation Y. As important as apologetics are, the style of a 21st-century Catholic revival will be more about walking than talking, more about the performance of ethics and aesthetics than philosophical apologetics. A church that is clearly under a reformatory spirit (as it is just now) is a church that can embrace nones and a church that nones can embrace. The sacramentality of Catholic practices provides a venue for such spiritualities, where nones, who truly love good liturgy, might include in their liturgical milieu both Burning Man and the God-man who burns with love.

So worry not. The nones are on the quest. If they quest far enough, they will bump into a faith tradition that places a heavy emphasis on the pilgrim and that understands the unique event of being an embodied human. The church nourishes itself on the very idea of event, on the very reality of dwelling in a mystical body and encountering the body in which absence becomes true presence. Such pilgrims may be transformed, then, by a reconstructed appreciation for particularity in the universal, for the uniqueness of Jesus. Such pilgrims become then a *lumen fidei*; and in the light of such faith, as Pope Francis wrote in his first encyclical, “our hearts are touched and we open ourselves to the interior presence of the beloved, who enables us to recognize his mystery,” the mystery of our lives in Jesus who is both source and summit of the journey.

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