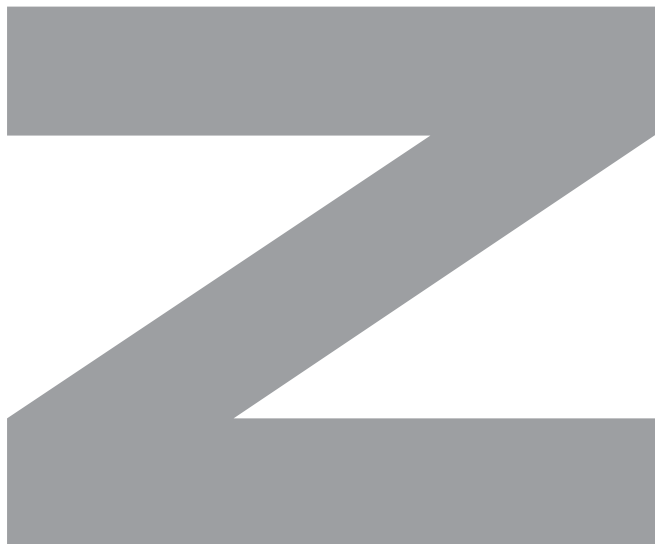


# MEET GENERATION



**UNDERSTANDING AND REACHING  
THE NEW POST-CHRISTIAN WORLD**

**JAMES EMERY WHITE**



**BakerBooks**

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Finally, to Mecklenburg Community Church, an amazing community of people who continue to die to themselves daily in countless ways in order to reach out to their friends and family, neighbors and coworkers with the message of Christ. It's an honor to be your pastor.

I will teach you hidden lessons from our past—  
    stories we have heard and known,  
    stories our ancestors handed down to us.  
We will not hide these truths from our children;  
    we will tell the next generation  
about the glorious deeds of the LORD,  
    about his power and his mighty wonders.  
For he issued his laws to Jacob;  
    he gave his instructions to Israel.  
He commanded our ancestors  
    to teach them to their children,  
so the next generation might know them—  
    even the children not yet born—  
    and they in turn will teach their own children.  
So each generation should set its hope anew on God,  
    not forgetting his glorious miracles  
    and obeying his commands.

Psalm 78:2–7 NLT

# Introduction

They are the Final Generation.  
Gen Z 2025 Report

This is not another pop-sociological book about a particular generation. This is a book about the most significant cultural challenge facing the Western church that just so happens to be reflected in a new generation.

A recent survey of thirty-five thousand Americans by the Pew Research Center found that the rise of the “nones” has grown to encompass 23 percent of America’s adults. This means that nearly one out of every four adults in the United States, when asked about their religious identity, would say “nothing.” Further, many who were once in the church are now leaving it. About 19 percent of Americans would call themselves “former” Christians.

The generation being shaped most significantly by this, often called Generation Z, will come to typify the new reality of a post-Christian world. As the first truly post-Christian generation, and numerically the largest, Generation Z will be the most influential religious force in the West and the heart of the missional challenge facing the Christian church.

Unfortunately, the realities of a post-Christian context for the West have yet to be fully grasped by the Western church, much less responded to. Yet the rise of the nones and the coming force of Generation Z will inevitably challenge every church to rethink its strategy in light of a cultural landscape that has shifted seismically. If the heart of the Christian mission is to evangelize and transform culture through the centrality of the church, then understanding that culture is paramount. It is toward that end this work is offered as a hopeful complement to my earlier works: *Serious Times* and *The Rise of the Nones*.

This book has two parts. The first details the new realities facing the Christian church. Chapter 1 explores what I call the second fall and the rise of the nones, including the latest research on the new post-Christian realities facing the West. This sets the context for the world Generation Z both inhabits and is being shaped by. The second chapter is an introduction to Generation Z—what marks them and defines them. A third chapter is offered on the specific family context that is shaping them in ways unlike any other generation in history.

The second part turns the corner toward response, including the importance of truly becoming countercultural as a church. This is followed with a look at how to speak into the culture we are countering in ways that are both winsome and compelling. The final chapters explore new approaches to evangelism and apologetics, as well as the strategic decisions the church I pastor has made to reach the unchurched and Generation Z.

Finally, I've provided three appendices featuring three talks I delivered at Mecklenburg Community Church (Meck) that reflect issues relevant to reaching Generation Z. The first is an example of how to address a controversial issue—in this case, gay marriage. The second explores the world of the occult (and our culture's fascination with it) by mapping out the spiritual world. And the third is an example of how one might build an apologetic bridge for the sake of pre-evangelism using science.



## *Introduction*

This book, as with others I've written, is not simply theory or even research. Meck, which I have had the privilege of leading for nearly three decades, experiences over 70 percent of its growth from the unchurched. Demographically, we have skewed younger every year for the last decade. Reaching the emerging, post-Christian generation is not rhetoric for us but the reality that consumes us daily. It is my hope and prayer that this book serves countless other churches on the same path.

PART 1

# **THE NEW REALITY**

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# 1

## A Seventh Age, the Second Fall, and the Rise of the Nones

Religion is the key of history.

Lord Acton

### **A Seventh Age**

One of the more intriguing observations about the flow of history surfaced in an important essay written just after the Second World War that I was introduced to while studying at Oxford University in England. It was written by a historian named Christopher Dawson. In it he makes the case that there have been six identifiable “ages” in relation to the Christian church and faith, each lasting for three or four centuries and each following a similar course: each of these ages began and then ended in crisis.

The heart of each crisis was the same: intense attack by new enemies from within and from outside the church, which in turn demanded new spiritual determination and drive. Without this determination and drive, the church would have lost the day. Dawson accounted for six such ages at the time of his writing.<sup>1</sup> I believe we are now living at the start of another. We are at the end of an age and stand at the beginning of another.

A seventh age.

I am not alone in sensing we live in a pivotal time. Political strategist Doug Sosnik is famed in Washington circles for his “closely held, big-think memos on the state of American politics.” He believes the United States is “going through the most significant period of change since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution.” Years from now, Sosnik argues, “we are going to look back at this period of time and see it as a ‘hinge’ moment . . . a connection point that ties two historical periods in time, one before and one afterwards.”<sup>2</sup>

Identifying these “hinge moments” is actually a deeply biblical idea. The Bible lauds the men of Issachar for being sensitive to exactly these kinds of dynamics: “From the tribe of Issachar, there were 200 leaders. . . . All these men understood the signs of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take” (1 Chron. 12:32 NLT). That tandem—knowing the signs of the times *and* how best to live in light of them—is key.

So what signs are going to mark this seventh age? Few are unaware of the economic uncertainty, global instability, technological advances, and demographic transitions that abound. But what specifically are the trends, the patterns, the movements, and most of all, in relation to Dawson’s thesis, the crises from within and from without the church that we should pay attention to?

There are quite a few from which to choose.

From within the Christian movement itself, there is the expansion of Christianity southward in Africa, Asia, and Latin America

that can only be called explosive. And with it, the new challenge of the globalization of Christianity. Philip Jenkins argues that by the year 2050 only one Christian out of five will be a non-Latino white person, and the center of gravity of the Christian world will have shifted firmly to the Southern Hemisphere.<sup>3</sup> The challenges this will bring are enormous, including the relationship between the Western and the non-Western church, which has not always been an easy one.

Another significant challenge is the continued rise of Islam and whether Islam will modernize peacefully or we will continue to have what Samuel Huntington presciently called the clash of civilizations that has so defined our world since 9/11.<sup>4</sup> In other words, will the future of Islam be the model of, say, Indonesia or that of ISIS? Of equal global importance is what will lead China once Marxism falls. Will it be some form of continued authoritarianism, a national socialism, a type of Buddhism, or the surfacing of the underground Christian church?

Another major crisis to be reckoned with on a different front is the radical redefinition of the most foundational institutions within creation itself—marriage and family. No longer is family defined as a male husband and a female wife, much less involving children. Male with male, female with female, children with surrogates, multiple parents, polygamy, and polyamorous unions abound. In 2015, Britain became the first country in the world to allow three-parent babies.<sup>5</sup> It is a new day in which the very idea of family is being recast in light of personal desire.

But even beyond family is the challenge brought to the very idea of what it means to be human. I have long told my graduate theology students that the doctrine of humanity is, by far, the most pressing doctrine of our day in regard to culture. It is the one area of Christian thought that is most challenged by the world in which we live, not to mention the one we have the least to draw from historically. Find a reflection from Origen or Athanasius,

Luther or Melancthon, Barth or Brunner that speaks to stem-cell research, human cloning, or transsexualism. As the first five centuries hammered out Christology and later generations tackled everything from the Holy Spirit to revelation, ours is the generation that will be forced to examine and elucidate the doctrine of humanity in ways that confront both changing morals and new technological frontiers.

## The Second Fall

But the most profound cultural challenge is the one that encompasses all of these trends and more. *It's the cultural context itself.* And what is that cultural context? The great crisis of this seventh age is that there has been a second fall. The first fall led to God's expulsion of human beings from the Garden of Eden. The second fall was when we returned the favor. In our world, increasing numbers of people lead their lives without any sense of needing to look to a higher power, to something outside of themselves. Leaders of science and commerce, education and politics—regardless of their personal views—do not tend to operate with any reference to a transcendent truth, much less a God.

At first glance, you may not think this has really happened, particularly in the United States. Most people in the United States believe in God. It could be argued, as Peter Berger once did, that America is “as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever.”<sup>6</sup> But something like atheism isn't at the heart of the second fall, because philosophical atheism is not at the heart of secularism nor the principal challenge to Christian faith.

The heart of secularism is a *functional* atheism. Rather than rejecting the idea of God, our culture simply ignores him. Or as Cathy Lynn Grossman, the co-researcher of the famed 2008 American Religious Identification Survey documenting the rise of

the nones, concluded, people today “aren’t [merely] secularized. They’re not thinking about religion and rejecting it; they’re not thinking about it at all.”<sup>7</sup>

This is a new and profound break with the history of Western thought and culture. Even among those times and places that might be called pagan, true secularity in this sense was unknown. Whether it was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob or the gods of Greece and Rome, there were gods—something outside of themselves that people looked to. It would have been alien to anyone’s thinking to begin and end with themselves *alone* in terms of truth and morality, which means there would never have been a sense in which such things were self-generated or self-determined. No more. The second fall changed all of that and now shapes the world in which we live.

Specifically, for the West, this means we live in a world that is post-Christian. And it also explains why we now talk about the rise of the nones.

## **The Rise of the Nones**

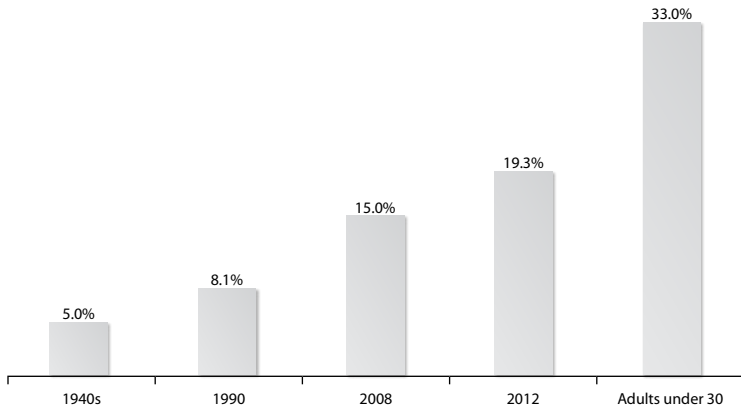
So who are the nones? The short answer is that they are the religiously unaffiliated. When asked about their religion on various surveys and polls, they do not answer “Baptist” or “Catholic” or any other defined faith. They simply say, “I’m nothing.”

And their numbers are rising. Faster than any other group.

At the time I completed my book *The Rise of the Nones*, the nones made up one out of every five Americans, which made them the second largest religious group in the United States—second only to Catholics. They were also the fastest-growing religious group in the nation. And when I wrote about their growth being fast, I meant fast (see fig. 1.1).

The number of nones in the 1930s and 1940s hovered around 5 percent. By 1990, that number had risen to only 8.1 percent, a mere

Figure 1.1  
**Percentage of Americans Claiming No Religious Identity**



3 percent rise in over half a century. Between 1990 and 2008—just eighteen years—the number of nones nearly doubled, jumping from 8.1 percent to 15 percent. Then in just four short years, it climbed to nearly 20 percent, representing one out of every five Americans. And for adults under the age of thirty, it increased to one out of every three people.<sup>8</sup>

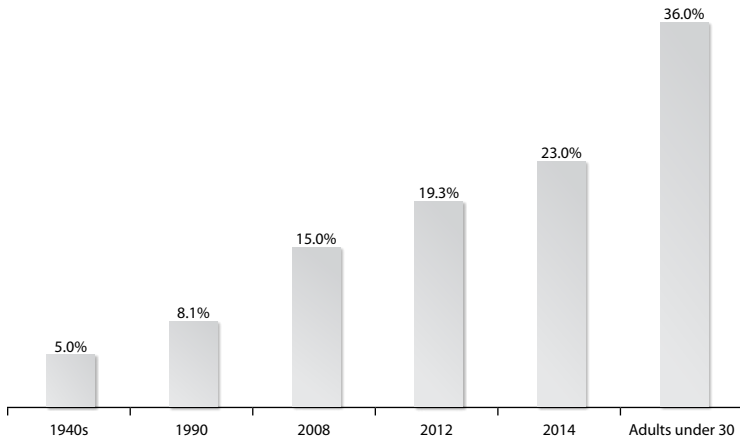
But it's gotten worse.

The latest figures from the General Social Survey were released in 2015, filling in the gap between 2012 and 2014. This was followed by findings released from the Pew Research Center based on its massive US Religious Landscape Study. In just two years, the nones climbed from 19 percent to 23 percent, or nearly one out of every four adults (see fig. 1.2).

The nones are no longer the second largest religious group in the United States; they are the largest.<sup>9</sup> And they are still, by far, the fastest growing. But the significance is not simply that the nones are growing; the number of professing Christians is also shrinking. The percentage of adults who described themselves as Christian in 2014 dropped nearly nine percentage points from the previous Pew study in 2007. So now only about 71 percent



Figure 1.2  
**Percentage of Americans Claiming No Religious Identity**



of American adults would call themselves Christian, down from nearly 80 percent.

More troubling is that of the 85 percent of American adults who were raised Christian, nearly a quarter of them no longer identify with Christianity. Former Christians now represent 19.2 percent of the US adult population overall. To put this into perspective, says Allen Cooperman, Pew’s director of religion research, “There are more than four former Christians for every convert to Christianity.”<sup>10</sup> And the rise of the nones and the fall of Christians is widespread, crossing race, gender, educational, and geographic barriers. Forget the Bible Belt or the Catholic North. This is happening everywhere and across every demographic.<sup>11</sup>

Another dynamic is that with each passing year the self-described nones are growing more secular. In a 2015 release of additional data from its 2014 Religious Landscape Study, the Pew Research Center found that over the last seven years, the number of nones who continue to believe in God or pray daily was in ongoing decline; 62 percent never pray and 33.3 percent do not believe in God. In 2007, 57 percent of all nones felt religion was

of little importance to their lives; in 2014, that number climbed to roughly two-thirds of all respondents. So there is not only a growth of the nones but also a growing secularism within their ranks. Even those who believe in God, who at 89 percent of all US adults remain the overwhelming majority, are wavering in that belief. Of the 89 percent who believe God exists, only 63 percent say they are “absolutely certain” of that existence.

This constitutes a significant change from earlier observations indicating that while the nones were growing, their spirituality was not waning. This was an encouraging dynamic in the face of growing religious disaffection. That encouraging dynamic is no longer in play.

The situation is even worse in regard to younger respondents (see table below). While 33 percent of what Pew calls “older Millennials” are among the nones, that number climbs to 36 percent of what it calls “younger Millennials.”<sup>12</sup> Beyond self-classification of religious identity, there is also a marked difference with age in terms of religious belief and practice. For example, among Baby Boomers, six out of ten say they pray every day. Only four out of ten of the youngest Millennials would concur. And, Pew reports, they do not seem to be growing more religiously observant as they get older. On the contrary, the oldest Millennials, now in their late twenties and early thirties, are generally less observant than when they were surveyed seven years earlier.<sup>13</sup>

The same results have been found through other research projects. Barna Group has concluded, based on fifteen metrics related to faith, that nearly half of the nation’s adult population (44 percent) now qualifies as post-Christian.<sup>14</sup> But that’s not all. “The pattern is indisputable: The younger the generation, the more post-Christian it is.”<sup>15</sup>

So where have the nones gone? Nowhere. That’s the point. There is no shift from Christianity to another religious brand. Instead, there is simply the abandonment of a defined religion altogether.

## In Many Ways, Younger Americans Are Less Religious Than Older Americans

*Percent of US adults who say . . .*

|   | Silent<br>Genera-<br>tion (born<br>1928–45) | Baby<br>Boom-<br>ers (born<br>1946–64) | Gen-<br>eration<br>X (born<br>1965–80) | Older<br>Millenni-<br>als (born<br>1981–89) | Younger<br>Millenni-<br>als (born<br>1990–96) |
|---|---|--|--|---|---|
| <b>Religious Behaviors</b>                        |   |  |  |   |   |
| They pray daily                                   | 67  | 61                                     | 56                                     | 46  | 39  |
| They attend<br>services at least<br>weekly        | 51  | 38                                     | 34                                     | 27  | 28  |
| <b>Religious Beliefs</b>                          |   |  |  |   |   |
| They believe in<br>God                            | 92  | 92                                     | 89                                     | 84  | 80  |
| With absolute<br>certainty                        | 71  | 69                                     | 64                                     | 54  | 50  |
| They believe in<br>heaven                         | 75  | 74                                     | 72                                     | 67  | 68  |
| They believe Scrip-<br>ture is the Word of<br>God | 69  | 64                                     | 61                                     | 50  | 52  |
| They believe in hell                              | 57  | 59                                     | 59                                     | 55  | 56  |
| <b>Religion's Importance</b>                      |   |  |  |   |   |
| Religion is very<br>important in their<br>lives   | 67  | 59                                     | 53                                     | 44  | 38  |

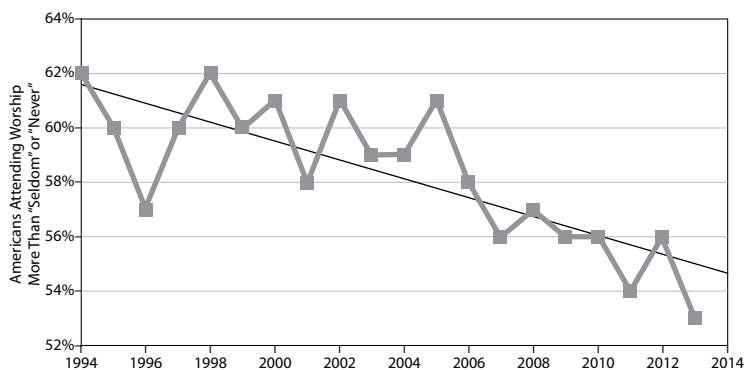
Source: 2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4–September 30, 2014, Pew Research Center.

Those who used to be simply “unchurched” are now dropping out completely.

What has this meant for the life of the church? It’s not pretty. Figure 1.3 graphs the last twenty years in regard to church attendance alone.

In 1994, 62 percent of Americans attended a church frequently. In 2013, barely half attended more than seldom or never. The same is true when plotting church membership, religion’s importance in

Figure 1.3  
**Decline of Church Attendance**

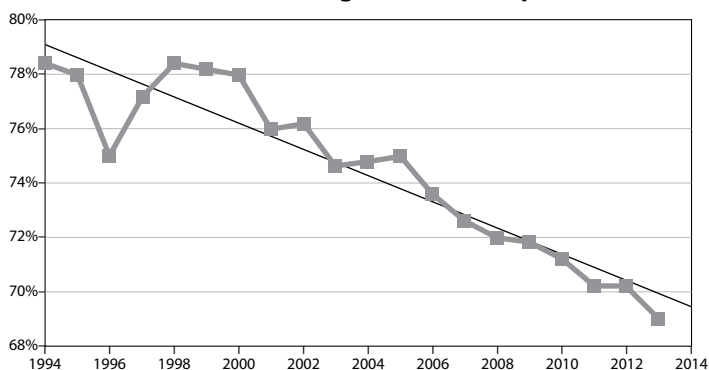


Graph by *Corner of Church and State*, an RNS blog.  
 Source: Gallup.

life, and religion’s relevance to today. All are in free fall. Combining all such graphs into one, the Religion News Service put together a graph titled “The Great Decline” (see fig. 1.4).<sup>16</sup>

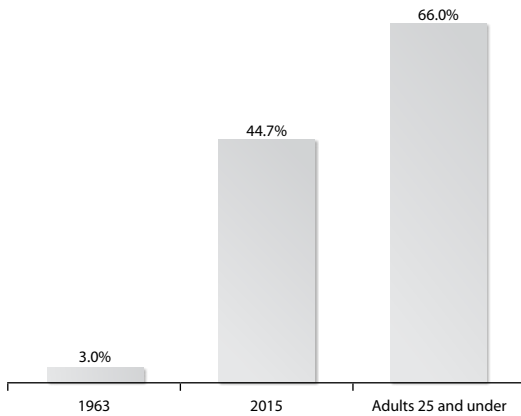
This situation is not unique to the American scene. According to the latest data from the first stage of the 2015 British Election Study, a survey of more than twenty thousand people by a team

Figure 1.4  
**The Great Decline: Average of Five Gallup Measures**



Graph by *Corner of Church and State*, an RNS blog.  
 Source: Gallup.

Figure 1.5  
**Percentage of Nones in the United Kingdom**



of academics from Manchester, Oxford, and Nottingham Universities, the nones in the United Kingdom have risen from just 3 percent in 1963 to 44.7 percent today—a stunning rise for just five decades (see fig. 1.5). And among adults age twenty-five and under, the number of nones climbed to nearly two-thirds.<sup>17</sup>

So pronounced is this trend in the UK that a two-year commission, involving leading religious leaders from all faiths, has called for public life in Britain to be “systematically de-Christianised.” In other words, Britain is no longer a Christian country and should stop acting as if it is.<sup>18</sup>

So is the Christian sky falling? Many cultural observers have countered the dismal statistics with the following truths—and they are true:

- Christianity is on the rise worldwide, particularly in the global South.
- Christianity remains the world’s largest faith, and the most distant projections to 2050 see it maintaining that lead (this includes the United States, with 71 percent currently affirming a Christian faith).<sup>19</sup>

So it would certainly be correct to say that rumors of Christianity's death are premature. Yet any informed observer also knows the following:

- The rise of the nones throughout the West is real and cannot be ignored.
- The “squishy center” is being pushed away from Christianity and, as a result, is rapidly changing the American cultural landscape.

Did the last one leave you a bit puzzled? It's worth exploring, because it is the essence of the answer to one of the more important questions surrounding this entire conversation; namely, “What is driving all this?”

### The Squishy Center

When it comes to driving forces in relation to such things as the rise of the nones, most would say it's happening because we now live in a post-Christian world. The thinking is that processes such as secularization, privatization, and pluralization have taken their inevitable toll.

That is true. And it is critical we understand all three processes.

*Secularization* is the process by which something *becomes* secular. It is the cultural current making things secular. Famed sociologist Peter Berger defined secularization as the process by which “sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.”<sup>20</sup> This simply means that the church is losing its influence as a shaper of life and thought in the wider social order, and Christianity is losing its place as the dominant worldview.

*Privatization* is the process by which a chasm is created between the public and the private spheres of life, and spiritual things are increasingly placed within the private arena.<sup>21</sup> So when it comes to

things such as business, politics, or even marriage and the home, personal faith is bracketed off.

*Pluralization* is the process by which individuals are confronted with a staggering number of ideologies and faith options competing for their attention.<sup>22</sup> The number of options for the private sphere to consider multiplies explosively, but particularly at the level of worldview and faith.<sup>23</sup> Peter Berger speaks of the traditional role of religion as a “sacred canopy” covering the contemporary culture. Religion, at least in terms of the idea of there being a God that life and thought have to consider, once blanketed all of society and culture. Today that canopy is gone, replaced instead by millions of small tents under which we can choose to dwell.<sup>24</sup>

Think about the effect of these cultural currents. Secularization means there is less of a supportive context for faith. Privatization has made all things related to faith a private affair, like having a favorite color or food. But most devastating of all has been pluralization. Not only are there multiple faiths and worldviews contending for our attention, but there is also the idea that they are all equally valid, equally true.

Yet the real power of these forces is their effect on what I call the “squishy center.”

Let’s set up a couple of extremes. In figure 1.6 I’ve set on one end the hard-core secularists and estimated them at 25 percent of the country. That might be generous, but it makes for easy math to demonstrate the cultural dynamic at play.

Figure 1.6

---

Secularists  
25%

On the other end (see fig. 1.7) are the true believers. These are individuals who have come to faith in Christ, and he operates as their Forgiver and Leader, emphasis on the “Leader” part. These

people are not Christian in name only but have had the deepest needs of their lives intersected by Christ, and their relationship with him is changing them to reflect him more with each passing year. Let's make them 25 percent too, which also might be generous.

Figure 1.7

|                    |                  |
|--------------------|------------------|
| Secularists<br>25% | Believers<br>25% |
|--------------------|------------------|

These two poles are not without warrant. The latest findings from Pew's American Religious Landscape Study found that not only are the nones growing more secular, but the truly religious are also growing more devout.<sup>25</sup>

In between these two poles, we have 50 percent of the country. This is the squishy center (see fig. 1.8). And it is squishy because those in its midst tend to be soft and pliable in terms of being shaped. Their individual beliefs have little definition, and even less conviction. If they consider themselves Christian, it is with a small *c*. Those in the center do not have the solidity of the secularist or the believer. As a result, those in the center tend to move toward whatever is culturally most influencing. However the culture tends to mold, shape, and pressure is how they are molded, shaped, and pressured.

Figure 1.8

|                    |                       |                  |
|--------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| Secularists<br>25% | Squishy Center<br>50% | Believers<br>25% |
|--------------------|-----------------------|------------------|

In the past, the forces within culture tended to move the center toward the believers' side of things. This meant that those hovering in the squishy center, if asked, would have said they were a Christian. That was the cultural thing to say. And they probably would have gone to church—at least on special days. There was cultural pressure on them if they didn't.

But culture has changed. It's not moving people that way anymore. It's not shaping people that way anymore. Now virtually



everything in culture is moving the squishy center to the secularists' side. Today, if asked about their religion, people in the center say they're nothing, because that's the cultural thing to say. And they don't go to church, because that's also the cultural thing *not* to do. This is what I mean by the squishy center and the way culture dictates to it.

Even modern representations of bygone eras when culture moved the squishy center to the Christian side of things airbrush such realities away. For example, look at the enormously popular BBC show *Downton Abbey*. When asked why the series failed to show Christianity as a central part of the characters' lives (which would have been the norm for aristocracy in the early part of the twentieth century), the show's historical consultant gave a blunt answer. The executives in charge of the series ordered producers to "leave religion out of it" for fear of alienating an increasingly atheistic public. As a result, the Crawley family is never shown in the process of sitting down at the table for dinner; instead, the action begins partway through the meal—all to avoid having to show the characters saying grace, which they very much would have done.<sup>26</sup>

Few cultural observers within the Christian community deny this dynamic in regard to culture and the squishy center. However, there are varied responses. The most prevalent is to use it to try to calm everyone down in regard to the rise of the nones and other troubling headlines. After all, the thinking goes, we're just losing the "nominals." And a little sloughing off of the uncommitted fringe, it is maintained, can be a good thing. And further, they would add, it's not like we "lost" someone who was truly "found." So the idea being promoted is, "Don't worry; it's not a big deal."

I take a different view. I would argue that it is a *very* big deal. The nominal population, no matter how it was shaped historically, has always been America's mission field. It's who Wesley and Whitefield, Moody and Graham won to Christ. The squishy center has always

been the prime evangelistic target. Its inhabitants were the ones most open, the ones who represented the fields white unto harvest.

We must realize, as the old saying goes, that “facts are our friends,” meaning that reality, no matter how much it bites, is always worth biting into. The important news of late is that reaching the nominals has become a much tougher task. So rather than heave a huge sigh of relief that evangelical faith may not be losing any ground in terms of percentage points, we must recognize that all this means is that we are, for now, holding our own.

But “holding our own” isn’t exactly the mission.

Perhaps even more alarming is that as the squishy center moves increasingly toward the secular side of things, swelling the ranks of the nones, the bridge those very nominals once offered between the two sides of believers and secularists is fast disappearing. As Ed Stetzer has rightly observed, “In the past, those of nominal faith were a bridge between the Christian community and the irreligious community. As the cultural cost of being a Christian increases, people who were once Christian in name only likely have started to identify as nones, disintegrating the ‘ideological bridge’ between unbelievers and believers.”<sup>27</sup>

But this is about more than losing an ideological bridge. We are also losing a relational bridge—one we can walk across to reach the largest generation in American history.

### Discussion Questions

1. Do you sense that we are about to enter a seventh age, as you read about earlier? What are a few of the trends you see going on around you or mentioned in this chapter that make you feel this way?
2. Why is the doctrine of humanity the most pressing doctrine of our day?

3. As a result of the second fall, our culture is not rejecting the idea of God but rather simply ignoring him. What is the difference between ignoring God and outright rejecting him?
4. The nones are now the largest religious group in America, accounting for one out of every four adults. Not only that, but for every convert to Christianity, there are more than four former Christians. Do you recognize the size of the nones as a group and the religious shift that is happening in the population? Is your church's ministry reflective of these changes?
5. These days barely half of Americans attend church more than seldom or never. Does your service planning take this into account? If not, how could it?
6. Why is it a big deal that the United States is losing the largely nominal population of believers (the squishy center)?