Chapter 4

Unaffiliated, Yet Religious: A Methodological and Demographic Analysis

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The mid-twentieth-century secularization theory – that an increase in modernity means a decrease in religion – has been largely debunked (see Berger 2014). Despite increased modernity the world has in fact become more religious; 80.8% of the global population self-identified with a religion in 1970, rising to 88.1% in 2010 and with a projected increase to 91.5% by 2050 (see table 2; Johnson and Grim 2015). At the same time, the boundaries between religion and non-religion (atheism and agnosticism) are becoming increasingly blurred. As this chapter discusses, many surveys have reported that individuals are leaving institutionalized religion and becoming part of what is known as the “unaffiliated”. But who exactly are the unaffiliated (also called the “nones”)? The category of the unaffiliated has become ubiquitous in both social scientific and popular language, yet the term suffers from a lack of clarity and nuance. In many studies, the term is conflated with the non-religious, leaving a serious gap in understanding of the religious leanings of the majority of the “nones”. In addition, the issue of international perspective is important – what “increased secularism” means is different in the United States than in, for example, Indonesia or Kenya. It can refer to, among other variables, a decrease in attendance at religious services, changes on particular ethical issues, or self-identifying as non-religious.

The purpose of this chapter is to nuance the category of the unaffiliated to interpret the whole in its various parts: atheists, agnostics, and – counter-intuitively – religionists. Doing so requires looking beyond survey measures and engaging with other types of source material that reveal a different, more complicated, picture. Ethnographic studies, data from religious communities, and on-the-ground reports provide a more complex picture of who the unaffiliated are and, perhaps more importantly, are not. Inaccurate measurement of the “religious nones” also affects data reporting on the size and structure of

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1 For example, Ronald Lindsay cites data from the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) and the Pew Research Center without critique or explanation, equating Pew’s “nones” with ARIS’s “lack of belief in God”, despite Pew’s own reporting of the actual religious beliefs and practices of the “nones” (Lindsay 2014: 13–14).
other world religions. The fundamental issue is how researchers use differing survey instruments and data gathered from these instruments to estimate the numbers of adherents of various religions.

Sources of Demographic Data on Religion

Three major sources for demographic data on religion worldwide are censuses, surveys/polls, and data from religious communities (see Johnson and Grim 2013: Chapter 7). Governmental censuses are the most comprehensive way of enumerating a country’s population. They generally are administered every 10 years, with data released in the 3–5 years following. The frequency of censuses allows for calculation of relatively accurate growth rates and comparisons of numerous variables from decade to decade. However, not all countries ask a religion question on their censuses. In the twentieth century about half the world’s countries asked a religion question, but starting in the 1990s increasing numbers of countries began dropping the question, deeming it to be too controversial, too expensive, or uninteresting. Other countries assume their populations to be adherents of a single religion, such as 100% Muslim in Turkey or 100% Christian in Samoa, making a religion question seem irrelevant. In 2014 the International Crisis Group urged the government of Myanmar (Burma) to drop questions they deemed “needlessly antagonistic and divisive,” such as those related to religion, ethnicity, and citizenship status, due to conflicts between Buddhists (the majority) and minority groups such as Rohingya Muslims (Michaels and Yen Snaing 2014). About half of recent censuses asked a question on religion, including those of 14 of 27 countries in the European Union.2

Censuses do have limitations as a major source of demographic data, however. Respondents, especially those from lower social classes and persecuted religious minorities, might not feel completely free to be honest in answering questions. This was the case with India’s latest census, in 2011. As of mid-2015 the data had not yet been released, but some observers speculate that the government purposely over-states the Hindu population to mask the realities of growing Muslim and Christian (minority religion) populations (Jagannathan 2015). In addition, the religion question offers members of Scheduled Castes only Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist as choices for religious affiliation, while members of Scheduled Tribes can indicate any religion. “No religion” or “atheist” is

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2 Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, United Kingdom.