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The “Nones”

Religion has been a major part of our country’s history since its founding. It is a sensitive issue that people often have very strong opinions about. One of the best parts about the United States is the freedom of religion that is guaranteed to each of us in the Constitution. This gives every individual and group the ability to believe in and practice any religious traditions they want. It also a large part of the reason that America is so culturally diverse and full of different kinds of people with different values and worldviews. This heterogeneity is extremely beneficial to our society because it allows new ideas to continuously circulate, and cultivates innovation and progress. Our diversity is our strength. However, people often forget that freedom of religion also means the freedom to not be religious at all. This is known as atheism, which is when someone does not believe in the existence of a higher power and doesn’t associate themselves with any religious identity (also sometimes referred to as secularism). This is also a very sensitive issue, as being an atheist in this country, as well as in many other countries around the world, can often be controversial and frowned upon. Recently in America, the number of atheists, or the people who respond with “none” when asked what religion they identify with, is growing significantly. The religiously unaffiliated, or the “nones,” now make up about 23% of the adult population in the country. When compared to just 9 years ago when it was only 15%, it is easy to see that atheism is on the rise and will continue to grow indefinitely. But what can account for this change in religious identities that we are seeing? John C. Lyden, a professor of Philosophy and Religion at Grand View University, compiled a book in 2015 that addresses this issue titled, “The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture.” In his book, Lyden claims that it is the rapid advancements in technology, globalization, and the personal computer that have led to an increase in people altering their religious beliefs. Also, Russell Glasser, a computer scientist, atheist blogger, and host of a popular video channel called *The Atheist Experience* discusses this topic in his article, “How Online Social Media is Changing the Face of Atheism.” He concludes that it is social media and people’s ability to connect online that has promoted the expansion of secular thinking. Though there may not be one clear-cut answer as to why atheism is becoming more prominent, it is clear that technology and the Internet are having a definite impact on organized religion in the world today and are at least somewhat responsible.. The secularization thesis, which states that as societies become modernized through advances in science and technology, the popularity of and the need for religion declines, has proven to be true. Because of this process, our religious identities are changing along with our values and worldviews. Modern technology, especially social media, is proliferating secularism and is directly linked to the decline in religious affiliations we see today.

Because of the freedom to explore ourselves on theinternet, and the convenience of online time and space, we are able to research and question our religious beliefs and identities. Time, space, and even our personalities are different in the online world than they are in real life. David Weinberger, an American technologist, professional speaker, and Internet entrepreneur discusses this concept in his essay, “Selections from *Small Pieces Loosely Joined*.” Weinberger especially focuses on space, time, knowledge, and self and how these things have changed along with the development of internet technology. He states, “The distancelessness of the Web is just the most obvious of the disconnects between it and the real world… The Web is woven of hundreds of millions of threads… And, in every case, we determine when and how long we will participate, based solely on what suits us” (Weinberger 109-110). Here, Weinberger addresses how the online world is a more convenient and comfortable place for us than reality. Space becomes distanceless and time becomes personalized based on our own individual agendas on the Web. This convenience isn’t necessarily a bad thing, as it has given us easier access to information and is not constrained by real-world rules and norms. The Web is limitless, which has given us the freedom to explore our identities and really investigate our personal beliefs and values. Religion is a popular subject that people are able to explore thanks to the accessibility of online space and time. This idea is a central theme in Lyden’s book which focuses on how the Internet is changing religious identities. Lyden argues, “The personal computer provides a rich new environment through which Pagans find a new meaning for their religious expressions. Through the digital…world of the Internet, time and space are compressed in such a way as to allow for the dynamic construction of alternative realities… The Internet acts as a tool for both the production and consumption of alternative religious identities” (531-532). Lyden and Weinberger both describe how time and space are different on the Internet, but Lyden goes into detail about how this is promoting changes in our religious identities. These alternative religious identities that Lyden discusses also include modern day atheism and agnosticism. The internet is causing many people to question their religious beliefs, or whether they even believe in religious ideologies at all. This is because there is an abundance of information available on the Internet that may contradict or completely disagree with the religious discourses that many people have been told their entire lives. Lyden refers to this process of people unaffiliating themselves with religious ideologies due to the Internet and the modernization of our society as the secularization thesis. People are becoming more secular and altering their religious identities more frequently now because of the freedom and convenience of the world-wide Web.

This ability to question our beliefs has essentially created a safe space on the Internet where non-religious people and people with religious identities outside the norm can act in concert with one another. On certain websites, social media pages, blogs, and other online communities, these people can meet like-minded individuals, exchange ideas, discuss their opinions, and promote secular thinking. Howard Rheingold, an established critic, teacher, and author of “How to Recognize the Future When It Lands on You” discusses this idea about how technology is changing our social relationships. He says that the Internet is, “already beginning to change the way people meet, mate, work, fight, buy sell, govern, and create. Some of these changes are beneficial and empowering… Large numbers of small groups, using the new media to their individual benefit, will create emergent effects that will nourish some existing institutions and ways of life and dissolve others” (Rheingold 121). These groups are what he refers to as smart mobs, or groups of people who are able to act in concert with each other through their technological devices. Smart mobs will indeed dissolve certain institutions and ways of life, and this is already occurring with organized religion. These people are cooperating with one another through online spaces to abolish outdated religious traditions and working to keep our society modern and inclusive of religious minorities. Although the number of people with no religious affiliation is growing in the United States, the “nones” are still very much a minority. Glasser examines this issue and how the Internet is helping to resolve it in his article, “How Online Social Media is Changing the Face of Atheism.” He states, “Prior to the Internet, the typical situation was very much a case of ‘majority rules.’ If you’re a lone atheist in a Christian community, the majority could effectively shame, silence, and isolate you… Add in access to the Internet, and suddenly you’ve got the ability to connect with alternate opinions you want to hear, and weigh them against the input you’re getting from your family and your peers” (Glasser). Atheists/agnostics can now feel a sense of community and belonging like religious organizations have had for centuries thanks to the Internet. People who don’t fit into standard religious categories no longer need to feel ashamed or isolated for what they do or don’t believe because they can communicate with others online who have similar mindsets. The online community of secular thinkers like Glasser advocates critical thinking in hopes that people will really take a second look at religion and get to know themselves more as far as their religious identities. Rheingold’s prediction that technology will change the way we communicate and the way we share ideas has proven to be true. This had led to secularism becoming more popular in our culture recently since more people feel that they can express their opinions about the sensitive and often controversial subject of religion.

Social media in particular is drastically changing the way people view religion and is also responsible for popularizing secularism. Social media has become part of our everyday lives and is a great place to spread ideas and generate social movements. On social media websites and applications, people can have intense and honest conversations about religion with others who agree or disagree with them. Chris Willman, a freelance writer whose work is frequently featured in the *Hollywood Reporter*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *Rolling Stone*, discusses the importance of social media in altering religious identities in his article, “Do Advancements in Technology Lead to Atheism?” He states, “Partly responsible for the rise of nonbelievers is social media… [Social media] helps us form new and different opinions than those we’ve been raised with, and this is particularly true of millennials and the generation Z populous. It's those groups that are challenging religion the most” (Willman). Younger people in the United States make up the majority of the non-religious populace. It’s important that America respects and listens to its young because they often think outside the box and are not constrained by old traditions. Younger generations are moving away from religion as they have grown up in a highly globalized and technological society. Young people also are more active in social media and therefore are also the most active in spreading secularist ideas all across the Web. Social media gives us the ability to find our own answers and choose our own religious identities, and it also helps clear up some of the stereotypical misconceptions that many people still have about atheists. There are certain social media sites that are having a larger impact on this issue than others, such as Facebook and Twitter. This is the central topic in Rebecca Savastio’s article, “Social Media Growing Atheism by the Millions.” Savastio is a writer and editor at the *Guardian* *Liberty Voice*, and in her article she argues that Facebook is the social media site that has had the largest influence on changing patterns in religion and atheism. She states:

 Even more notable than the jump in atheism is the increase in people who say they simply don’t adhere to any religion… Such a large [increase] has undoubtedly been helped along by social media, especially Facebook. A search of the words ‘atheist,’ ‘agnostic,’ ‘skeptic,’ ‘God,’ and ‘secular,’ reveals close to 100 atheist Facebook pages ranging in membership from a few thousand to a quarter million people. (Savastio)

Here we can see how Facebook is helping people who may be questioning their religious identity, or who just want to be a part of a group of like-minded individuals. Some of these Facebook pages are dedicated to specific causes, like offering a safe haven for Syrian atheists or raising awareness that there is a large number of atheists among people of color. Many of these pages update followers on news stories related to religion and provide humorous quotes or images for non-believers. Ultimately, the main goals of Facebook atheist groups are to promote secularism in a positive manner, have respectful discussions about religion, and advocate for logic, reason, and science. Savastio provides a specific example (Facebook) of Willman’s discussion of how social media is changing religious identities and proliferating atheism. It’s often the younger generations of free-thinkers that Willman describes who are joining these Facebook groups in order to feel like they are part of a community. When people go on these kinds of social media pages, it often leads to people learning more about their religious identity and even completely changing it. This is why we see a trend in people’s social media habits correlating with their worldviews, personal beliefs, and religious affiliations.

 Our concepts of knowledge and authority are also changing along with modern Internet technology, and this is especially important as it relates to religion. Michael Lewis, a non-fiction writer, financial journalist, and *New York Times* best-selling author, discusses this topic of knowledge in his essay “Pyramids and Pancakes.” Lewis describes the story of a fifteen-year-old boy named Marcus who creates a profile on Askme.com and poses as a legal expert under the name of Justin Anthony Wyrick Jr. Marcus answered hundreds of questions a day from people who needed information on the law and criminal matters. In reality, he was just a kid who had watched too many Court TV shows and had no professional experience, but people took him seriously nonetheless. When discussing how Marcus was able to pull this off, Lewis states, “Reduce the law to the sum of its information and, by implication, anyone can supply it. That idea had already traveled a long way, and the Internet was helping it to travel faster. After all, what did it say about the law that even a fifteen-year-old boy who had never read a law book could pass to a huge audience as an expert in it? It said that a lot of people felt that legal knowledge was accessible to the amateur” (Lewis 102). Marcus is a prime example of how our notion of expertise has changed and knowledge can come from anywhere now thanks to the Internet. He took advantage of the anonymity and the convenience that the Internet offers and changed the way people view expertise. Glasser also addresses this topic in his article when he argues that we no longer need to rely on religious authorities to provide us with knowledge about the world, rather, we can find information for ourselves on the Internet. He states, “Around the world and in the United States… the Church is grappling with a wave of doubt and disillusionment among members who encountered information on the Internet that sabotaged what they were taught about their faith” (Glasser). Much like Marcus, online atheist communities are challenging the norms of traditional authority and knowledge. Glasser would argue that everyday people are more knowledgeable about religion because we have access to the Internet, just as Lewis points out that knowledge is available to the amateur online. Religious authorities such as pastors and priests often tell people what they should believe, but now people have the freedom to be skeptical and find out what they really believe on the Web. The rise in the religiously unaffiliated is a direct result of this. The Internet itself has become an authority that people look to for information and expertise. Since the Internet is changing how much we know about religion, it is also changing the way we feel about it. If people learn a lot about religion from online research, they may decide that it is not for them and separate themselves from religious traditions altogether, which is why the Internet is largely responsible for the decline in religion.

 It is difficult to deny that the Internet and social media are affecting the way people feel about religion. This has somewhat caused our society to become polarized, with people on either side of the religion issue standing staunch in their belief that their worldview is the right one. But overall, the expansion of the Internet has been extremely beneficial to non-believers and other religious minorities. It has given a voice to people who have been suppressed and isolated for their way of thinking, and it has allowed the “nones” to join together as a community and support one another. Technology has encouraged people to think critically and question everything, rather than just relying on an authority to define them. Social media has liberated atheists who are passionate about spreading their ideas and opinions to people all over the world. The modernization of our society as a whole has led to a spread in secularization and caused the need for religion to decline. Questions that used to be explained by religious philosophies we can now answer with a simple Google search. Religious identities are shifting as people get to know themselves and others like them on the Web. But what happens if the Internet takes religion to a whole new level? What happens when technology essentially becomes religion and science becomes God? This implies that we may just trade one form of religion for another. Nonetheless, it is important that we continue on the path of technological advancements and that people use this technology to learn about themselves and the world in which we live.

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