Launch Series: The ‘Fuzzy’ Nones

Posted on March 7, 2014

In the last blog of the launch series Linda Woodhead discusses recent survey data which demonstrates the variations of opinions and beliefs among individuals who identify as having ‘no religion’; reminding us that just as ‘the religious’ do not conform to neat and tidy categories, neither do ‘the nonreligious’.

Abby Day and David Voas coined the term ‘fuzzy fidelity’ to refer to the large numbers of religious people who don’t conform to sociologists’ neat categories of what a ‘real’ religious person should look like.[ii]

I’m in the process of analysing results from two large surveys of religion and values I
carried out with YouGov last year, with the assistance of Professor Bernard Silverman. Because they were completed by 8,455 GB adults aged 18+, they provide a good sample of those who say they have ‘no religion’ — 3,199 people in total. [iii] And because they contain over forty questions about different aspects of religion and values, they offer a richer portrait of respondents than previous polls.

One of the striking things that emerges is that, far from all conforming to neat-and-tidy categories of ‘religious’ or ‘atheist’, a lot of nones are pretty fuzzy too.

According to the 2011 Census, a quarter of the population now say they have no religion – my survey finds that an even higher proportion (38%) report having ‘no religion’. [iii] This grows to nearly half (48%) of adults under thirty, far fewer than the proportion who now identify with a Christian denomination. Indeed, although ‘Christian’ remains the identity of a majority of those aged 60+, ‘no religion’ has – for the first time – become the identity of the majority (55%) of those aged 18 and 19.[iv]

But against the idea that there is a growing tide of hard secularism we must set the finding that most ‘nones’ are not atheists. In fact atheism has been growing far less than ‘no religion’. In the population as a whole, one in five people are now atheist. Amongst the ‘nones’, 43% are atheist, 40% are agnostic, and 16% believe in God.

Most nones don’t decisively reject God. What they reject is an identification with ‘religion’, with a particular religion, and with the label ‘religious’ – especially when the question is worded as below to give a positive alternative (Table 1).

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which, if any, of the following best describes you?</th>
<th>Nones12%</th>
<th>All15%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A spiritual person</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A religious person</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both spiritual and religious</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would not describe myself, or my values and beliefs, as spiritual or religious</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of these</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We find that hardly any nones go to church or read holy scriptures, take any notice of religious authorities, or pray. Their most common spiritual practice is meditation or taking time to still the mind (18%). Some say they believe in God (16%), and almost a quarter that they are influenced by religion. But the largest category are simply indifferent to religion.

So the idea that most ‘nones’ are atheists who are implacably opposed to all forms of religion or spirituality is wrong. We can put a number on the ‘thoroughgoing nones’. We identified them as those who say they have no religion, are atheist, and view both the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church as ‘a negative force in society’. Altogether they amount to just 13% of nones, and 5% of the population. (Similarly, just 7% of the population in our survey say they are influenced by humanism or secularism.)

If we look at the thoroughgoing nones in more detail, their most striking demographic characteristic is that they are disproportionately male: 62% male, 38% female. Unlike nones in general, they don’t have a youthful profile and are found in all age cohorts up to 60 in similar numbers. By contrast with nones as a whole, there is no evidence that the number of hard nones is growing.

In other words, Richard Dawkins and those who share similar views are not representative of the majority of nones. Most are a lot less bothered about religion, and some are spiritually active. Overall, the category shows a lot of internal variation, and
future research will no doubt cut it up into even smaller sections as our knowledge and analysis improves. Smaller-scale and qualitative studies are already helping.

At the end of the day, the word ‘fuzzy’ as applied to either religious or non-religious people is useful only as a placeholder. It’s dangerous if it leads us to think there is something confused about the people to whom we apply the term. It’s we who study them who are confused – once our categories improve we can ditch the word. In the meantime it’s a useful reminder that most people are neither thoroughgoing religious nor non-religious ‘fundamentalists’ but dwellers in a more rich and variegated landscape somewhere inbetween.


[iii] The surveys were designed by Linda Woodhead for the Westminster Faith Debates and carried out online by YouGov. Fieldwork was undertaken between 25th-30th January 2013 and 5th-13th June 2013. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+). Northern Ireland is not included. The surveys are available at http://faithdebates.org.uk/research/

[iii] The 2011 *Census* reports a quarter of the population of England and Wales saying ‘no religion’. The 2012 *British Social Attitudes Survey* (n=3,248) reports 48% saying ‘no religion’. The variation may be partly explained by the form of the question. Fewer people seem to opt for ‘no religion’ when given the option of ‘Christian’, as on the Census. More report ‘no religion’ when the option is ‘CofE’, ‘Catholic’, ‘Baptist’ etc., as on the BSA survey and our survey.
The sample size of 18-19 year olds in our survey is small (144) but the proportion reporting no religion is in line with what would be expected of this cohort given the growth rate of the no religion category.

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