

Ryan P. Burge. *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021. 145 pages. \$19.99.

The Nones by Ryan P. Burge is a thought-provoking book that delves into the growing trend of religious disaffiliation in the United States. Using a wealth of data and analysis, Burge provides a comprehensive overview of the “nones,” a group of people with no religious affiliation, and explores their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

The impetus for this book was the results of the 2018 GSS, in which the nones reached the same size as Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants in America. Burge engages various quantitative data sources over decades to trace the emergence of this shift in the religious landscape. His audience is not political science students but denominational leaders and laity who wish to understand the statistics to better understand the world around them. Burge is well-suited to this work of data analysis for religious leaders. He is a pastor in the American Baptist Church and a political science professor at a university. Burge code-switches between those two identities to make the statistical data accessible to an audience without a social science background.

Burge mostly interprets data from surveys, notably the General Social Survey (GSS), polls, and census. The GSS survey is “the gold standard in measuring religious change in America” (1) because it has asked the same religious questions since 1972. Burge also defines and explains RELTRAD classification scheme and the seven categories used to capture a snapshot of the religious landscape in the United States. Along with analysis, the book contains many helpful charts and graphs to visualize the trends.

Burge provides a historical overview of religious affiliation in America and how it has changed over time. He argues that the decline of religion in the United States is not a recent phenomenon but rather a long-term trend that has been accelerating in recent decades. Burge, interpreting the data, clearly shows “that every successive generation starts out less religious than the one prior...” (81)

Next, Burge delves into the characteristics and beliefs of the nones. He demonstrates that the nones are a diverse group with various religious, political, and social beliefs. Their lack of affiliation does not necessarily mean that they are non-spiritual or non-religious. He also shows that the nones are not necessarily hostile to religion but often have a more nuanced view of spirituality and faith.

In the final part, Burge explores the implications of the rise of the nones for society and politics. He argues that the nones are not a monolithic group and that politicians and religious leaders must pay attention to their diverse perspectives and values. He also argues that the nones have the potential to be a powerful political force, particularly if they can organize around issues that matter to them.

A strength of the book is Burge’s willingness to engage with the complexities of the nones. He acknowledges that this group is not monolithic and that there are significant differences between those who identify as atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particulars. He also explores the role that factors such as age, gender, race, and education play in shaping the beliefs and behaviors of the nones.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of *The Nones* is its analysis of the political trends of religious disaffiliation and religious affiliation. For example, Burge notes that “of the twenty largest predominately white Protestant traditions in the United States, sixteen became more Republican between 2008 and 2018” (131). If traditions are becoming less politically

diverse, people who are Christian and lean more to the left are running out of options. Burge is clear that this political hostility in churches contributes to the increase of the religiously unaffiliated. At the same time, Burge challenges preachers for not speaking into politics from the pulpit, allowing congregants to be shaped politically by social media and news outlets instead of theology and tradition. “If pastors don’t give congregations guidance on how to think about politics,” says Burge, “they will get it from somewhere else” (132).

The Nones is an important book for pastors and congregations seeking to explore the why behind shifts in the religious landscape in the United States. Along with insight into the nones and their influence in the country, readers will leave with a better understanding of the various surveys utilized to describe the diverse attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs of people in the United States.

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