

Counting Religious Nones and Other Religious Measurement Issues:
A Comparison of the Baylor Religion Survey and General Social Survey

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Introduction

The new Baylor Religion Survey (BRS) is an important addition to the available data on religion in contemporary America (“American Piety,” 2006). Few national surveys have included so many valuable questions on the religious background, beliefs, and behaviors of adult Americans. The BRS is a fruitful source for expanding our knowledge about religion and the initial analysis that accompanied the release of the data last Fall has already made a major contribution to the sociology of religion (“American Piety,” 2006; “American Piety 2005,” 2006; Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson, 2006; Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson, 2007; “Losing My Religion,” 2006).

But some of the conclusions drawn from the BRS are problematic and need close scrutiny. This paper first introduces the BRS methodology and then examines BRS-based claims regarding a) the levels of religious nones, b) trends in the level of religious nones, c) the underreporting of evangelicals resulting from the supposed overreporting of religious nones, and d) the degree of religiousness among those with and without a religious preference.

BRS Methodology

The BRS is based on a postal survey conducted by Gallup. The postal survey was recruited in two ways. First, Gallup completed a national, English-language, random-digit dialing (RDD), telephone survey with 3,002 adults. Of these 1002 were again contacted by phone. 660 agreed to do the follow-up BRS mail survey and 603 provided mailing addresses. Second, these 603 and the remaining 2000 from the initial RDD were sent the BRS mail survey and 1721 completed questionnaires were returned. The BRS reports its response rate as 24.4% (Bader, Mencken, and Froese, 2007).¹

Religious Nones²

First, there is the assertion of the BRS that existing studies have underestimated the proportion of adult Americans with a religious preference. Based on the BRS they claim that “the unaffiliated are currently at 10.8% of the population as opposed to the 14% percent [sic] claimed by others surveys. This three to four percent [sic] difference is significant (“American Piety,” 2006, p. 8).” They add that “Researchers have previously over-counted the religiously unaffiliated by 10 million Americans... (“American Piety,” 2006, p. 8).”

Their basis for finding fewer unaffiliated is what they describe as a “more accurate” method for ascertaining religious preference based upon multiple and more in-depth questions. As they describe it, “In addition to presenting respondents with a standard list of denominations, the Baylor Religion Study asks respondents to give the

¹ The details of the initial response-rate component from the RDD are not presented and some of its general description raises questions whether its calculation followed the standards of the American Association for Public Opinion Research.

² “Religious nones” is used to refer to those who in response to items on religious preference or identity indicate they have no religious preference/identity. In the BRS work they are also often referred to as the “unaffiliated.”

name and address of their place of worship. Combining these three measures of religious belonging enables us to more thoroughly and accurately sort people into broader religious traditions (“American Piety,” 2006, p. 7).”

Specifically, the items used by the BRS to measure religious tradition in general and level of attachment to religion in particular are as follows:

Q1. With what religious family do you most closely identify?

Q2. If possible, please provide the specific name of your denomination.

For example, if you are Baptist, are you Southern Baptist Convention, American Baptist Churches in the USA, or some other Baptist denomination? If you are Lutheran, are you Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, or some Lutheran denomination?

Q6. What is the full name of your current place of worship? (Please write your answer in the space below. If you attend more than one place of worship, please refer to the one you attend most often.)

The conjoined claims for there being a lower level of religious nones than previously reported and that their new method for measuring religious affiliation is more accurate are questionable on several grounds.

First, the difference in no religious preference levels is modest and most likely not statistically significant. Apparently based on their single item (Q1), they report the unaffiliated rate at 11.6%. They go on to mention that this is not statistically significant from the 2004 General Social Survey (GSS) level of 14.3% (“American Piety 2005,” 2006, p. 9).³ It is also uncertain that their revised level of 10.8% (RELTRAD2) has a statistically significant difference with the GSS. It is reported as such in Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson (2007, p. 17 and note 4) for both weighted and unweighted data, but it is unclear whether this takes into consideration the design effects from the respective study designs and/or from the weights themselves.

Second, the difference between the BRS and GSS appears to be a bit smaller than reported. The figure of 14.3% reported for the 2004 GSS is slightly off. It appears to represent the percent with no religious affiliation when the GSS data are not weighted and all cases, including missing values, are retained. When the data are properly weighted and missing values are excluded to make the GSS comparable to the BRS figures which excluded missing cases,⁴ the 2004 GSS shows 14.1% with no religious preference. This is a small correction, but one that does narrow the GSS-BRS gap from 3.5 percentage points to 3.3 points.⁵

³ The GSS are in-person samples of adults living in households in the United States. For details of GSS methodology see Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2007.

⁴ The BRS 10.8% figure is based on a reported n of 1687 with 34 respondents who “did not provide sufficient information to be classified into a religious tradition” excluded. The 34 represent 2.0% of their total sample. However, the 10.8% is a weighted figure with an adjusted n of 1679 and 42 cases as missing.

⁵ There is also a difference between the BRS and GSS on item non-response. On the GSS there is very little missing data on religion, averaging just 0.4% for 1972-2006 and 0.4% for 2000-2004. Based on responses to other religious questions (attending religious services, frequency of praying, belief in an afterlife), the few missing cases on the GSS tend to resemble those with a religion rather than religious nones. On the BRS after the three questions are asked 2.0% are missing on religious tradition vs. 7.6% “missing when

Third, the difference is made to seem greater by emphasizing a larger gap than is found on their main comparison with the GSS. They note, “Barely one in ten Americans (10.8%) has no religious affiliation. This is between four and six percentage points less than estimated from other recent national surveys (Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson, 2006, p. 17).” This exaggerates the differences since most alternative levels are about 14% which is only a little over a 3 percentage-point difference, not 4-6 percentage points. The higher figure of 16% appears to refer to the 16.3% reporting either No Preference (15.3%) or agnostic/atheist (1.0%) on a 1996 Pew survey (Kohut, Green, Keeter, and Toth, 2000, p. 18). This high figure comes from the including in the No Preference category people who had reported “only a nominal affiliation – individuals who reported some kind of affiliation, but displayed no religious behaviors or beliefs (Kohut, Green, Keeter, and Toth, 2000, p. 19, note 4).” Before the reallocation of these affiliators only 10.5% had expressed No Preference and 0.7% agnostic/atheist (Keeter, 2006). In an update of Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson (2006), Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson (2007) revise their statement to “Barley one in ten Americans (10.8%) has no religious affiliation. This is several percentage points less than estimated from other recent national surveys (see Hout and Fischer 2002; Smith and Kim 2005).”

Finally, while they emphasize the greater innovativeness and greater accuracy of their three-question method of measuring religious tradition in general and the proportion unaffiliated in particular, the extra two items had only a moderate impact on their figures. They state that “for about six percent of persons claiming no religion in Q1, the name of a denomination or congregation or both are subsequently provided in Q2 and Q6 (Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson, 2006, p. 17). This suggests a decline in Q1 from about 11.5% to 10.8%. However, another statement indicates that 13.3% did not select “a religious family with which they identify” on Q1 (Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson, 2006, p. 16). In this case the reduction would be about 2.5 percentage points or about 18-19%.⁶

In addition, what difference does occur between the BRS and other surveys may not reflect a better measurement, but merely a different measurement due to methodological variations in samples and survey design.

First, this modest difference can be explained by differences in the demographics between the GSS and BRS. Several post-stratification, demographic weights were applied to the BRS to make it resemble the GSS distributions. All versions raised proportion of religious nones in the BRS. For example, using age, gender, region, and race/ethnicity to form a weight increased the level of religious nones in the BRS to 12.2%. Similarly, if

congregational information is ignored (Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson, p. 17).” In part this higher number merely results from BRS using a broader definition of missing, “People claiming a religious family of non-denominational Christian, other religion (unspecified), or don’t know were dropped as missing for religious tradition in the absence of denominational or congregational data to accurately assign them (Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson, 2007, p. 10).”

The difference in missing levels between Q1 and the composite measure of religious tradition is seen in part as evidence that congregational ties are more relevant and meaningful to people, but the high number of people reported as not responding to Q1 may include a notable number of people who merely skipped it as redundant and put a more detailed response in Q2. In self-completion questionnaires people often look over the whole instrument before beginning to fill it out. Moreover, since Q2 appears on the same page as Q1 people could readily see both items at the same time. Given this, a response to Q2 and a skip on Q1 may only represent streamlining on the part of respondents.

⁶ The archived data set apparently has a revised Q1 variable rather than the raw data, so this can not be examined directly.

one takes the % that reported voting in the 2004 election and weights the GSS to resemble the BRS, the GSS level of religious nones falls from 14.5% to 12.5%.⁷

Second, there is a reasonable possibility that lower no religious preference levels were produced on the BRS by non-response bias. It is common in self-completion surveys and especially those with low response rates to overrepresent those who are interested and involved in the topic of the survey, in this case the religiously engaged as opposed to the religiously inactive. The BRS should be able to test for this in part by looking at the profile of people in the screen-in RDD survey and of those in the Gallup panel. It is likely that such an analysis would indicate that the religiously involved were more likely to complete the BRS than others were. A partial test of this was done comparing those on their telephone follow-up who decline to do the mail survey (399) to those who agreed to do and gave an address (603).⁸ As predicted, it showed that 48.1% of refusers attended religious services at least twice a month vs. 54.7% of those willing to get the mail survey (Bader, Mencken, and Froese, 2007). The GSS on the other hand covers dozens of topics and thus respondents do not opt in or out because they are attracted to or repelled by the topic of religion.

Finally, it is probable that the different question wordings contributed to the modest difference in no religious preference. As Hout and Fischer (2002) and Smith (1991) have documented, religious preference questions that mention “no religion” as an option tend to get more such mentions than items that do not explicitly mention this option. This is a clear difference between the GSS, which gives “no religion” as one of five response options to its initial religious preference item (“What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?”), and the BRS, which instead presumes a religious affiliation (“With what religious family do you most closely identify?”). The BRS does provide a box to check for “No religion”, but that follows a list of 39 religions and it has no explicit listing of either agnostic or atheist.

However, more reports are not universally accepted as more accurate when it comes to religious preference. Kellstedt and Green (1993, p. 59) argue as follows regarding the design of items on religious preference, “First, questions should be preceded by a screening question to reduce social desirability effects. Since it is still normative in American society to be religious, many respondents who have no behavioral or cognitive links to a religious group will nonetheless express a preference, particularly if they are not given the option to express the lack of such a preference. A screening question that allows for a variety of no preference responses is very effective in this regard. The alternative is to seriously underestimate the secular population.” Consistent with this contention, a meta analysis by Smith (1991) found that religious preference/affiliation questions that explicitly mentioned no religion as a category got more such mentions than those that did not. Moreover, Caplow (1998) concluded that religious preference is overstated even in surveys that mention no religion as an option. Kohut, Green, Keeter, and Toth (2000) go even further and indicate that not only should

⁷ The weighted BRS figure is that 90.6% voted in 2004 election and the weighted figure in GSSs that asked about voting in that election was 66.9%. Using the relationship between voting and being a religious none and adjusting the GSS level up to the BRS level of voting lowers the % of religious nones on the GSS to 12.5%. The GSS level of voting is typical for major surveys like the American National Election Study and represents overreporting (Duff et al., 2007). The BRS figure is exceptionally high and may represent both overcoverage of voters as well as overreporting.

⁸But not all of the 603 actually did the BRS.

no religion be mentioned in the question, but that to combat social-desirability overreporting, nominal affiliators should be moved into the no religion group before doing analysis.

Additionally, the idea of overreporting of religious traits is strongly supported by the extensive literature that shows that people overreport their frequency of attending religious services (Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves, 1993; Caplow, 1998; Hout and Greeley, 1998; Woodberry, 1998; Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves, 1998; Smith, 1998; Presser and Stinson, 1998).

Moreover, it may not be just the individual items or even the combination of responses across items that generate fewer no religious preference responses on the BRS. The three-part, religious affiliation battery has the dual advantages of ferreting out additional religious affiliation than a single question and clarifying the denomination and/or religious tradition that someone follows. But by asking in turn for ones “religious family,” “denomination,” which of 12 terms “describe your religious identity,” which of the terms best describes it, and finally “the full name of your current place of worship,” they create a strong demand for respondents to come up with some religious affiliation/identity. Non-religious or at best marginally religious respondents may in effect be pressured into mentioning some religious connection.

In brief, the difference in level of religious nones is modest in size and may not be statistically significant. Furthermore, the difference may result from differences in sample composition and non-response bias. Finally, to the extent the BRS estimate is meaningfully different, it represents merely a different figure, not a better and more accurate one.

Trends in Religious Nones and Religion in General

Second, they argue that the lower reported level of religious nones indicates that the proportion religiously unaffiliated has not been increasing in recent years and thus there is little basis to consider that America is becoming more secular. They state that “Conventional wisdom, backed by some research, has suggested that the United States is becoming a more secularized nation – one where the significance of religion is declining. But results ...from the Baylor University Religion Survey paint a different picture. In 2004, the General Social Survey reported that 14.3% of the population had no religion, but by using a more detailed measure in the Baylor Survey, researchers determined that only 10.8 percent of the population or approximately 10 million are unaffiliated.”⁹

⁹ This 10-million figure is simply wrong and too low. The adult household population in 2005 was estimated at 215,130,009 by the Bureau of the Census. Thus, 10.8% would be about 23,234,000, not 10 million. What the 10 million is supposed to represent is how much lower the BRS estimate of 10.8% is than the approximately 14% found in other research or in turn the undercount in religiously-affiliated Americans. They state that “Researchers have previously over counted the religiously unaffiliated by 10 million Americans... (“American Piety,” 2006, p. 8).”

However, even this second number is also problematic. As noted above, 10.8% of adult Americans in 2005 is about 23,234,000. 14-14.3% is about 30,118,000 to 30,265,000. The difference is about 7.5 million not 10 million. The 10 million figure probably comes from using the total US household population in 2005 of about 233,378,000 which would convert into a difference of about 10,093,000. However, this is not appropriate since the figures on religious affiliation from the BRS, GSS, and other surveys generalize to American adults living in households and not to all Americans.

In the accompanying report they add, “Are Americans losing their religion? Prior national studies with questions on religion, such as the General Social Survey and National Election Study, show an increase in the percent of the population with no religion over the past quarter century. For example, the 1988 General Social Survey reports that eight percent of the population has no religion. By 2004, the percentage had risen to 14.3% This growth in ‘religious nones’ is often used by academics and the press to indicate growing secularization in the United States. But are Americans really that detached from organized religion?(“American Piety,” 2006, p. 7)” In another report, they indicate that the apparent rise in religious nones “may have more to do with the issue of survey measurement and validity and that appropriate refinements in survey questions and subsequent coding schemes would help researchers gain more accurate insights to religious affiliation and identification ... We find that the rising percentage of ‘religious nones’ in the United States has more to do with survey design and measurement than a downward trend in religious affiliation. Indeed, we were able to recover and more accurately classify numerous cases that in previous surveys would have been miscoded as simply missing (Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson, 2006, p. 24).”

These statements imply that the BRS provides evidence that there has not been an increase in religious nones over time in the United States. However, as a single survey conducted at one point in time, by itself it can shed no light on trends in religious beliefs and behaviors. It may question whether the level of religiousness in general or of religious attachment in particular is as low as some other surveys have indicated, but with no comparable readings earlier in time, it provides no evidence on religious change. This perspective was ultimately embraced by BRS when Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson (2007, p. 23) noted, “We fully acknowledge that cross-sectional data prevent us from answering questions regarding trends in religious affiliation in America.”

Religious Nones and Evangelicals

Third, they contend that the overreporting of religious nones results in an undercounting of evangelicals. They state that “Researchers have previously over counted the religiously unaffiliated by 10 million Americans, and may have overlooked as many or more Americans who are actually affiliated with Evangelical congregations and denominations (“American Piety,” 2006, p. 8).” Elsewhere they further argue that “religious adherents are more evangelical than prior studies have indicated. It turns out that a fair number of those who claimed no religion in our sample were actually active, engaged affiliates of Evangelical congregations (Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson, 2006, p. 25).” Furthermore, in a comparison of what they refer to as the Steensland et al. classification of religious tradition to the BRS classification, they find that 10.5% of the unweighted sample were coded differently and this included 5.8% “excluded as missing in the Steensland et al. approach that we are able to recover (Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson, 2007, p. 15).” Of the 10.5% reclassified 53.9% were Evangelical Protestants, 26.4% mainline Protestants, 10.7% Catholics, 7.3% other traditions, and 1.7% were Black Protestant (Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson, 2007, p. 15). But the claim that Evangelical Protestants have been disproportionately undercounted is uncertain.

First, since the BRS file does not appear to contain the raw, unadjusted denominational, theological data, the impact of the follow-up questions can not be fully assessed.

Second, a similar analysis on reclassified religious nones in the GSS makes it unclear whether so-called hidden evangelicals are prominent among religious nones. Several times in recent years (1998, 2000, and 2006) the GSS has asked follow-up questions about the specific congregations that people attend. Unlike the BRS, the congregational follow-ups were not intended to expand on a person's religious preferences, but to create a sample frame of places of worship for subsequent national studies of congregations (Chaves, 2004). Everyone who reported attending religious services at least once a year was asked the following:

As part of another study that will be conducting a survey of churches, synagogues, and other religious organizations, we need to know how to telephone the place where you attend religious services. The survey of congregations will ask about general religious and social activities and will not have anything to do with you personally or your answers to this survey. Your answers to this questionnaire will be kept confidential and your name will not be used in any way. Please tell me how you would look up the place where you attend religious services in the telephone book.

IF R SAYS S/HE ATTENDS MORE THAN ONE
CHURCH/CONGREGATION, ASK ABOUT THE PLACE S/HE
ATTENDS MOST OFTEN. IF S/HE ATTENDS EQUALLY OFTEN AT
MORE THAN ONE PLACE, ASK ABOUT THE PLACE S/HE
ATTENDED MOST RECENTLY.

- A. What name would you look under?
- B. What is the address there?
- C. What is the telephone number?
- D. What is the name of the minister, priest, rabbi, or religious leader of this congregation?

The congregational follow-up battery was asked of all respondents who reported attending religious services at least once a year irrespective of whether they had or had not expressed a religious preference. As such, it functions in much the same way as the follow-up questions on the BRS. It is more restrictive in that it covers only those who attend religious services at least once a year while the BRS congregational follow-up is asked of those who attend less than once a year (but not those who never attend). But for finding religious connections among the religious nones, it does cover all who went to religious services even just once in the last year.

Among the religious nones on the GSS, mentioning a congregation falls from 83.3% for those attending services at least several times a month to 54.8% for those attending more than once a year, to 29.9% for those who attended only once a year. Of the 76% of religious nones who were not asked the congregational follow-up questions

because they did not attend services at least once a year, 90% never attend religious service. Thus, congregational mentions among this excluded group would likely be extremely small and almost none would probably represent meaningful affiliations.¹⁰

Of the religious nones who were asked the follow-up question on congregation only 39% mentioned a congregation.

Looking at religious nones who did mention a congregation shows that 6.9% are Jewish or another non-Christian faith, 20.6% are Catholic, 37.9% are fundamentalist Protestants on the GSS FUND classification of denominations (Smith, 1990; Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2007), 15.5% are moderate or liberal Protestants on FUND, and 19.0% are unclassifiable Christian churches. The latter consists of a number of congregations described too vaguely to be assigned a theological position on FUND. Comparable figures from the 2000-2004 GSSs are 4.2% Jewish/other non-Christian, 29.3% Catholic, 33.7% fundamentalist Protestants, 29.2% moderate and liberal Protestants, and 3.4% are unclassifiable (mostly “Christian” and non/inter-denominational). This suggests that among religious nones who mention a congregation fundamentalists are slightly overrepresented while Catholics and moderate or liberal Protestants are underrepresented. But if the majority of religious nones who attend religious services are considered, then relatively few are fundamentalists/evangelicals or any other religious preference.

Next, the theological profile of the religious nones was examined. As Table 1 shows, those with no religious preference are much less likely to believe in Biblical inerrancy than those with a religious preference. The minority of religious nones who did mention a congregation to the special congregational follow-up was more likely than all religious nones to believe in Biblical inerrancy, but they were still much less likely to endorse this concept than those with a religious preference and they differed even more from those with an evangelical/fundamentalist religious preference.¹¹ Based on personal belief, it appears that evangelicals/fundamentalists are underrepresented among religious nones as a whole and even among religious nones with some congregational tie.

Thus, taking religious nones as a whole indicates that there are relatively few evangelicals/fundamentalists and mostly those with little or no connections to religious groups. Looking at the minority of religious nones who do report a congregational connection shows a mixed pattern. In terms of denominational and theological orientation evangelical/fundamentalist churches are represented at or above their level among those with a religious preference, but looking at beliefs on Biblical inerrancy, religious nones with a congregational tie definitely underrepresent the evangelical/ fundamental perspective. The reason for this difference in results may be that for many the congregational ties are probably minimal. Attendance of religious services is very low among this group and many people may be naming a congregation that they are not actually affiliated with - perhaps they only attended while accompanying a friend or

¹⁰ People attending a congregation less than once a year, but who might be considered as still being meaningfully affiliated with a congregation and its religion would include the housebound, institutionalized, and retirees and others who have relocated away from the place of worship. The institutionalized of course would not be included in either the GSS or BRS.

¹¹ The GSS uses the term “fundamentalists”, while the BRS tends to refer to “evangelicals”. The two terms have been used together here to refer to these two similar and overlapping, but not identical, groups. On the complex issue of how to classify people as evangelicals/fundamentalists, see Barna, 2007; Hackett and Lindsay, 2007; Smith, 1998; Smith, 1990).

family member or visited as part of special occasions (weddings, funerals, concerts, etc.). Moreover, attenders of evangelical/fundamentalist churches may be more inclined to invite others to their services than non-evangelicals/fundamentalists are. After all, proselytizing is a central practice for the evangelicals/fundamentalists and that outreach could account for the better showing of such faiths among the mentions of congregations while having a poorer showing on the theological beliefs of the religious nones.

Thus, while follow-up questions on the BRS and GSS do add evangelical/fundamentalist mentions, it is not clear that evangelical/fundamentalist mentions are disproportionately added so that their share in the total population of adherents is increased. Also, it is uncertain how many additions are meaningful adherents to this religious tradition rather than people with only weak ties and preference or even no meaningful identification at all.

Religion among the Religious Nones and those with a Religious Preference

Finally, they make the point that many of the unaffiliated are still religious. As they note, on the one hand, the “religiously unaffiliated are unlikely to attend church. Nine out of ten never report attending religious services (“American Piety,” 2006, p. 12).” But on the other hand, 63% of the unaffiliated “believe in God or some higher power”¹² and 32% pray “at least occasionally.” As they note, “of Americans unaffiliated with organized religion...some traditional forms of faith persist.” This pattern is neither new nor surprising (Hadaway, 1989; Hout and Fischer, 2002; Smith, 2005). The GSS has since the early 1970s shown that many of those with no religious preference hold religious beliefs and engage in religious behaviors. For example, from the 2000-2004 GSSs of those with no religious preference, 13.2% attend church more than once a year, 48.8% believe in an afterlife, and 68.2% believe at least sometimes in a higher power or God with 29.1% certain that God exists.

What is equally true, but not reported from the BRS, is that many of the affiliated have low levels of religious beliefs and behaviors. For example, of those reporting a religious preference on the 2000-2004 GSSs, 11.1% never attend religious services and 6.7% attend less than once a year, 13.5% do not believe in an afterlife, and 1.6% do not believe in God and 2.3% are agnostics. Similarly, on the BRS of those who have a religion 12.6% never attend religious services (Q5), 10.6% do not believe in religious salvation (Q25), and 0.9% do not believe in God (Q21). Just as the religious nones include some with religious beliefs and behaviors, those with a religious preference include some with little or no participation in religion and non-religious beliefs. In fact,

¹² The figure (“American Piety,” 2006, p. 12) that 62.9% of the religious nones “believe in God or some higher power” maximizes this belief since it a) excludes those with no opinion on God’s existence from the base and b) counts only the 37.1% who said, “I don’t believe in anything beyond the physical world” as non-believers. This includes as believers those who said “I sometimes believe in God,” “I believe in God, but with some doubts,” and “I believe in a higher power or cosmic force”. Thus, believers include those who most of the time don’t believe in God (2.1%), those that have doubts (4.8%), and those who believe in a “high power” or a “cosmic force” (44.5%) – a vague description that may refer to a Supreme Being, the laws of physics, or some other concept.

more people have a religious preference and never attend religious services than have no religious preference and attend more than once a year.¹³

While having a religious affiliation is positively associated with both religious beliefs and behaviors, there is a very imperfect match across these measures. Those with no religious preferences do include a fair number of believers and a smaller, but not trivial, number who are engaged in religious practices like praying and attending religious services. But the converse is also true - a small, but notable, number of those with religious preferences do not accept basic tenants of their faiths such as belief in God and/or in an afterlife and even more rarely or never attend religious services.

Summary and Conclusion

In sum, while contributing notably to the study of the role of religion in contemporary American society, some of results drawn from the BRS are problematic. First, the linked claims that the level of religious nones has been overestimated in other studies and that this error results from “inadequacies” in the other measures is doubtful. The differences between the BRS and GSS in particular may not be statistically reliable and could result merely from differences in demographic coverage and non-response bias. Should any meaningful difference in levels remain, they are likely to result from the explicit mention of “no religion” on the GSS and its de-emphasis on the BRS. This variation represents a small, but important, difference in measurement, but does not indicate that one approach is more adequate or accurate than the other.

Second, the idea that analysis of the BRS alone can shed light on recent trends in religious preference is wrong. As an observation at a single point in time, it can not meaningfully address that issue.

Third, it is possible, but unproven, that follow-up questions about congregations uncover more “active, engaged affiliates of evangelical congregations” than measurements lacking such items. It appears not to be possible to reproduce results from the archived BRS data and a similar analysis using the 2006 GSS shows mixed results with evangelical/fundamentalist congregations perhaps increasing their share of the population, but with the added evangelicals/fundamentalists not showing a theological profile consistent with such a religious designation.

Finally, it is true, as prior results have long documented, that religious nones are not without some religious behaviors and beliefs. But it is equally true that some of those with religious preferences exhibit few other signs of being religious. Thus, religious/non-religious preference has a complex relationship to other measures of religious belief and behaviors and one must examine both off-diagonals (the religious none who have “religion” and those with a religious preference who otherwise are not “religious”).

In sum, it is unclear that the BRS actually produces a reliably lower estimate of religious nones than other surveys and should that be the case, this results from a different measurement procedure, not a better one; there is no evidence that there has not been a rise in religious nones as indicated by times series from other surveys; it is uncertain that evangelicals/ fundamentalists have been undercounted; and many religious

¹³ On the GSS 11.1% of those with a religious preference never attend and 13.2% of those without a religious preference attend more than once a year. Of all adults the inactive religious are 9.6% and the attending religious nones are 1.8%.

nones do have some religious beliefs and behaviors, but a notable number of those with a religious preference do not hold religious beliefs and engage in religious behaviors.

Table 1

Beliefs about the Bible by Religious Preference

	All Those with Religious Preference	Those with Evan./Fund. Preference	All Those with No Religious Preference	Those with No Religious Preference, but Mentioning Congregation
Bible Literal	37.6%	59.9%	9.8%	19.0%
Bible Not Literal	48.9	34.2	33.7	43.1
Ancient Book	10.5	4.6	49.3	29.3
Other	1.8	0.8	4.2	8.6
Don't Know	0.7	0.3	2.8	0.0
Missing Values	0.4	0.3	0.2	0.0

Source: 2006 GSS

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