

You May Call Me a “None”

When I say this out loud in a conversation about religion in society, it’s always worth some laughs.

This term “none” comes from the Pew Research Center, how they measure the religious composition of a nation: “Generally, we rely on respondents’ self-identification. A key question we ask in many surveys is: “What is your present religion, if any? Are you Protestant, Roman Catholic, Mormon, Orthodox such as Greek or Russian Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, atheist, agnostic, something else, or nothing in particular?”....[Those] “who describe themselves as “atheist,” “agnostic” or “nothing in particular” are often combined into an umbrella group called the religiously unaffiliated (sometimes also called the religious “nones”).” I can hear the research teams laughing at their cleverness.

Their 2015 comprehensive survey report, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” <<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>> opens with: “The Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing.” They report that “This group....is more numerous than either Catholics or mainline Protestants....Indeed, the unaffiliated are now second in size only to evangelical Protestants among major religious groups in the U.S.” Their charts show that “religiously unaffiliated” persons include nearly one quarter of our nation’s total adult population, but well over 1/3 of adults under age 33 (Millennials).

To put my own story in a nutshell, I now live my life apart from a lifetime of involvement in church life. Yes, I’ve walked away, but it is through that heritage that I’ve arrived at these last years of my life. The church no longer directs my way of seeing things, but I’m not saying that others should follow my path. What I see today incorporates thoughts from many teachers, ancient to present. This wisdom heritage includes many contributions to my growth from those who raised me. From the beginning goodness and mercy preceded me, and I trust that they have followed me.

Because of my experience, I imagine that all of us have had teachers who’ve expressed doubts about accepted ways of thinking. What I finally saw in myself is that I’ve always lived with doubts about some things that Christians have said. However, I habitually discounted these doubts because I was trying to be true to the “faith of our fathers.” My mind may have been open, but my voice was silent.

It has taken a lifetime to believe that it is more important to be true to my self. I am the same person I've always been, and now I see that I've always worn doubt comfortably, even if unacknowledged. For me this is good. Others may be more comfortable with certainty, and this may well be good for them.

I also take comfort in knowing that as a "none" I'm not alone. But it's time to lift my voice in support of all who fit this "unaffiliated" category. There are as many different ways of being "unaffiliated" as there are of being religious. In effect, our nation's religious landscape has as much diversity as our glorious geological landscape. Each person walks a unique journey, with uniquely personal views of life on that landscape. Light falls on us all, but we see differently.

Frankly, my take now is that the world needs believers and it also needs doubters. But, more importantly, the world needs both believers and doubters to be more accepting of each other and of the many differing points of view in our religious landscape. In community life doubters need not treat believers as foolish, and *vice versa*, believers need not treat doubters as fundamentally flawed. One can be angry about evil in society, but religious doubt or irreligion *per se* is not evil; neither is religious belief outside of Christianity.

The whole of our lives together in community is much, much larger than any differences between believers and doubters. We all are travelers on this landscape, each on his or her own journey and each with his or her own story. It is better for me to simply tell my story, and to let this story fall where it will, read or unread, understood or misunderstood, responded to or left alone. In the larger picture my take on things is less important than my being the person I'm meant to be: aware, open to the larger world, ready to help out as I can. This is my "calling," if I may use a term familiar to those who self-identify as religious.