



---

MSU Graduate Theses

---

Spring 2022

## A Nation of Priests: Authority, Expertise, and the Religious Nones

Riley CT Brown

Missouri State University, Riley320@live.missouristate.edu

As with any intellectual project, the content and views expressed in this thesis may be considered objectionable by some readers. However, this student-scholar's work has been judged to have academic value by the student's thesis committee members trained in the discipline. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

---

Follow this and additional works at: <https://bearworks.missouristate.edu/theses>



Part of the [Regional Sociology Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Religion Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Brown, Riley CT, "A Nation of Priests: Authority, Expertise, and the Religious Nones" (2022). *MSU Graduate Theses*. 3724.

<https://bearworks.missouristate.edu/theses/3724>

This article or document was made available through BearWorks, the institutional repository of Missouri State University. The work contained in it may be protected by copyright and require permission of the copyright holder for reuse or redistribution.

For more information, please contact [bearworks@missouristate.edu](mailto:bearworks@missouristate.edu).

**A NATION OF PRIESTS: AUTHORITY, EXPERTISE, AND THE RELIGIOUS NONES**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, Religious Studies

By

Riley Brown

May 2022

Copyright 2022 by Riley Brown

# **A NATION OF PRIESTS: AUTHORITY, EXPERTISE, AND THE RELIGIOUS NONES**

Religious Studies

Missouri State University, May 2022

Master of Arts

Riley Brown

## **ABSTRACT**

Much of recent scholarship on the nones and the spiritual but not religious attempts to understand them through the concept of authority. Often scholars argue that authority has left traditional American religious institutions and that the nones are self-authorized in terms of religion. Scholars often make these claims without considering what self-authorization means. This thesis shows that attributing authority to the self is problematic and aims to provide another lens through which to view the nones. The better approach is to view the nones as experts rather than authorities. Thus, this thesis argues that the nones are religious experts. Furthermore, the thesis argues that the nones have a claim to religious expertise equal to that of institutional religious experts.

**KEYWORDS:** sociology of religion, sociology of professions, social theory, religious nones, spiritual but not religious, secularization, individualism

**A NATION OF PRIESTS: AUTHORITY, EXPERTISE, AND THE RELIGIOUS NONES**

By

Riley Brown

Master of Arts, Religious Studies

A Master's Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate College  
Of Missouri State University  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts, Religious Studies

May 2022

Approved:

John Schmalzbauer, Ph.D., Thesis Committee Chair

Mark Given, Ph.D., Committee Member

Kathy Pulley, Ph.D., Committee Member

Julie Masterson, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College

In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This thesis is a product of all of those who have invested in me throughout my academic career. I am indebted to my family, my friends, and my wife for their steadfast support of me in my day-to-day life. I am further indebted to the faculty of the Missouri State Religious Studies Department, all of whom provided me with constant guidance and care throughout my undergraduate and graduate degrees. I am particularly indebted to those who have helped me with this project. I would like to thank Dr. John Schmalzbauer for always being willing to provide me with assistance and allowing me to write a thesis he occasionally disagrees with.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Religious Nones	Page 1
The Empirical Nones	Page 2
Authority, the Nones, and Social Theory	Page 8
Self-Authorization and Religious Expertise	Page 14
This Study	Page 18
Authority and Expertise	Page 22
Authority	Page 22
Expertise	Page 32
Authority in Relation to Expertise	Page 36
Conclusion	Page 41
Religious Authority and Religious Expertise	Page 44
The Nones and Expertise	Page 49
Religious Expertise and Religious Professionalism	Page 54
Conclusion	Page 62
The Nones as Religious Experts	Page 65
Special Knowledge	Page 66
Expert Function	Page 74
Conclusion	Page 80
Religious Expertise and Modernity	Page 82
The Transformation of Religion	Page 85
Religious Expertise and Individual Religion	Page 93
Conclusion	Page 100
Conclusion	Page 102
Bibliography	Page 108

## THE RELIGIOUS NONES

We live in a world where many are beginning to disaffiliate with traditional religious institutions in favor of their own spiritual seeking. Groups such as the religious nones and the spiritual but not religious (who will be referred to in this study synonymously) are examples of these unaffiliated. Further, this phenomenon is deemed as acceptable and is quickly becoming normal to many of us today. This, as Charles Taylor points out, was not always the case and this shifting religious landscape is a rather recent historical development.<sup>1</sup> Five hundred years ago, it was all but unthinkable to reject the authority of religious institutions, whereas now it is all but unthinkable to accept it. Many have joined Taylor in asking what has caused this shift and have surveyed historical events leading up to the present moment. Others have decided that this rapid growth can be totally attributed to forces outside religion such as politics or new social norms. Rarely, however, do such theories look to the hearts of the nones themselves.

Why are so many people empowering themselves to leave their religious institutions to explore spirituality on their own? This is at the heart of what many are asking when they theorize about the unaffiliated. But this is not the most important question. As sociologist Nancy Ammerman points out, “[P]eople have probably always been religious in many ways that would have made their official religious leaders uncomfortable.”<sup>2</sup> The more relevant question is how people are empowering themselves in a spiritual sense. Furthermore, we must ask why society deems this exodus normal or acceptable. The answer to these questions lies at the heart of the current religious landscape and it must be answered if we would like to understand it.

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Boston: Belknap Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6.



We will see from a variety of sources that “self-empowerment” is central to the identity of the nones. While many claim that the nones leave religion on the basis of some sort of self-empowerment, few have taken this idea seriously. How would our view of the nones change if we explored what it means to be self-empowered in terms of religion? In order to answer this question, this thesis will look at the identity of the nones in relation to recent scholarship on authority and expertise. While it might seem oxymoronic to view the unaffiliated in this way, we miss the crucial ways in which they empower themselves and how we empower them if we do not do so. If we neglect the role authority and expertise play in the religiosity of the nones, we miss something critical. If we look at views of the nones and our views of them, we can come to a fuller understanding of this group that is becoming so prominent.

### **The Empirical Nones**

In order to study the religious nones, one must first attempt to define what this label means. Accordingly, we will begin by putting the definition in its broadest possible terms: *the religious nones are a group*. While this definition is frustratingly broad, it is all that one can immediately claim about this group without getting into sticky situations. Indeed, even this extremely broad definition is risky to claim because of the connotation behind the word “group.” A group is typically understood as a collection of people who have a similar trait, and this trait is what allows them to be ordered or classed together. This similar trait often affects some aspect of the collective’s life. To use a religious example, sociologists can expect that Evangelical Christians will adhere to certain customs, behave in certain ways, and even vote for particular parties while correlating this with their religious affiliation. This is often what we find: that the majority of those who identify with a certain group are in fact similar to one another in certain

respects and do behave in ways similar to each other in given situations based on their defining trait. This all stems from the fact that the group's traits typically form a part of their identity.

Within the realm of social science, the nones, while still being considered a group, do not have this shared form of identity outside of the way they answer a simple question on a survey.

The way in which surveyors identify the nones is based on their answers to polls about religious affiliation. When people indicate that they do not affiliate with any of the given religious options they are then labeled as a none. This is the common identity forming link that social science gives us for the nones as a group. While this is not much, it allows us to see that the nones are defined, at least by surveyors, by their lack of religious affiliations. Even though their "affiliation" is that they do not affiliate with any of the given religions, the way in which we identify the nones revolves around their religious preferences. From this starting point it would be correct to expand on our previous definition by claiming that the religious nones are a *religious* group. Where other religious groups on surveys have general tendencies (the majority of those who identify as mainline protestants are older) there are hardly any patterns with the nones. If we were to look for any correlations between the nones and certain demographics we would find very little helpful information. The only demographic variables that could be associated with the nones (age, race, political ideology, etc.) show no general pattern as far as who is identifying as one of the unaffiliated. Ryan Burge illustrates this by writing,

It's nearly impossible to give a simple description of who the nones are: they exist in large numbers in age, income, and educational spectrums. They now reflect the racial diversity of Americans as a whole and are more gender diverse than ever before. And while many people assume that the religiously unaffiliated are far-left

political liberals who favor the democratic party, that's become less and less true every election cycle.<sup>3</sup>

Burge argues that the full spectrum of those who identify as nones cannot be captured by demographic data. As soon as we claim that the nones are, for example, mostly well-educated white men, we have to acknowledge that a significant number of nones are not part of this demographic. Trying to make definitive claims by splitting the nones up into demographic subgroups, then, cannot reflect the group as a whole. Thus, defining the nones based on demographic or political data is not possible.

It is equally unproductive to attempt to define the nones in terms of belief. Nones do not all believe the same things. Not all nones are aggressive atheists or aloof agnostics. In fact, many nones still claim to believe in some higher power but posit that this power is different from the God we find in American institutional religion. Linda Mercadante discusses this theme over the course of her interviews with nones writing, "I learned I could not assume that when they spoke of the 'sacred,' a transcendent reality, a divine dimension, or even use the word 'God,' that they meant a 'personal' God."<sup>4</sup> The nones do often affirm that there is something out there, but they are extremely diverse in terms of what this "something" is. While some nones do believe in a transcendent personal God, others simply acknowledge something like an immanent universal will. These beliefs, and everything that could possibly fit in between, are displayed by the nones. This is another example of the extreme internal diversity of this group. A diversity that makes it impossible to define the nones based on strictly empirical findings.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ryan Burge, *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021), 70.

<sup>4</sup> Linda A. Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 93.

It is interesting, then, that scholars who are theorizing why the nones are rising so quickly often point to data dealing with political ideology to make their arguments. While scholars point to all kinds of demographic data to come to conclusions, by far the most common argument made by these theorists has to do with the assumption that all nones are a reaction to conservative politics. Even Burge acknowledges this. The basic argument goes something like this: Conservative politics has invaded religion in America and the nones are a reaction to this. Many of the scholars who subscribe to this idea argue that “the primary reason for the growing number of persons leaving religious practice, especially the young, is the identification of religion with conservative politics.”<sup>5</sup> But as we saw earlier, the nones are less and less of a political monolith with every election cycle. Furthermore, to claim that the nones are only a reaction to conservative politics mistakenly attributes something political to our foundational definition. On this reading, the nones are a *political* group. This definition undermines the religiosity of the nones and in a sense rejects their religious preferences. Rather than responding to religious phenomena, these thinkers believe the nones are simply responding to political phenomena. This, in essence, is what those who subscribe to this theory claim. And while there may be large numbers of nones who are political motivated, to claim that the group as a whole is, again, does not account for a significant portion of the group and does not reflect the data that has been collected. This theory, then, cannot account for all the nones and is thus inadequate when trying to explain their growth.

In a counterintuitive way, demographic and political data actually point to the fact that they cannot be used properly to come to an adequate definition of the nones. To attempt to define

---

<sup>5</sup> George Heron, “‘None’: The Changing Religious Landscape in the United States,” *Torch* (Fall 2015): 23.

the nones by any of the demographic metrics found by the social sciences comes up short because it cannot account for them all. The nones are too diverse. Indeed, scholars have even noticed this internal diversity and have labeled the further subgroups. These categories consist of atheists, agnostics, and what some call NIP's (or "nothing in particulars"). These NIP's make up the overwhelming majority of the none category while atheists and agnostics are minorities under the label.<sup>6</sup> While the first two categories correspond to standard religious labels (atheist and agnostic), the NIP's are much more varied and harder to pin down. The NIP category is also further split up into subcategories because many scholars have noticed NIP's shifting allegiances between religious institutions. It is not uncommon for a significant number of NIP's to shift religious identities from survey to survey. This is what prompts scholars such as Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam, to state, "Just as many political independents are actually leaners, we argue that many religious nones are actually liminal somethings, who still hold a weak sense of attachment to a religious tradition and thus may identify with the tradition sometimes, if not always."<sup>7</sup> Their study shows that many of the NIP's can be labeled as either liminal or stable in that significant portions of this subgroup have labeled themselves as nones at one point, but still label themselves in typical religious categories at another. As these studies show, the religious nones are very difficult to define based solely on demographic data. These findings do, however, contribute something to our definition. We can accurately claim that the nones are an *internally diverse* religious group.

---

<sup>6</sup> Burge, *The Nones*, 30-31.

<sup>7</sup> Chaeyoon Lim, Carol Ann MacGregor, and Robert D. Putnam, "Secular and Liminal: Discovering Heterogeneity Among Religious Nones," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 4 (December 2010): 597.

We have established that social survey research can only take us so far in defining the nones because of their internal diversity. This, however, is not entirely accurate. There is one more metric that social science definitively gives to a definition of the nones. This would be that the nones are an internally diverse religious group *that is growing rapidly*. The nones are one of the fastest growing religious groups in America and the western world. One scholar states that the rise of the nones is the most important religious phenomenon in modern times, arguing that within decades identifying with “no religion” will overtake identifying as a Christian in the UK.<sup>8</sup> This development is unprecedented in the history of the west. In America as well they are one of the fastest developing “religious” groups. George Heron observes,

In the 1930s and 1940s, the number of unaffiliated in America hovered around 5%. The number rose to 8% in the 1990s and is presently at 20% of the population, or over 50 million people. To give you some perspective, that number is greater than the total number of American Methodists, Lutherans, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, Jews, Episcopalians, Mormons and Muslims combined.<sup>9</sup>

From this we can see that in America as well the Religious Nones are on track to becoming the dominant religious label of individuals.

So, from looking only to survey data, we come away with a definition that argues the nones are an internally diverse religious group that is growing rapidly. While this does get us away from the frustratingly simple definition we began with, there is still much we do not know about the nones. This data, while useful, does not get us anywhere when trying to define who the nones are or what a none is. If the nones are indeed a religious group, religiosity must be taken

---

<sup>8</sup> Linda Woodhead, “Intensified Religious Pluralism and De-Differentiation: The British Example,” *Society* 53, no. 1 (February 2016): 42.

<sup>9</sup> Heron, “‘None’: The Changing Religious Landscape in the United States,” 17–24.

account of in their definition. But this definition, as we have seen, cannot answer the complex questions related to the nones' spiritual or religious lives. In short, the empirical social sciences give us an incomplete picture of who the nones are. Furthermore, survey data cannot be a basis for a theory concerning the religious identity of nones because the discipline can only tell us what the nones are answering on surveys. In order to expand our basic definition and come up with an adequate theory for the rise of the nones, we must expand our scope. To further understand and define the nones, I propose, we must be open to looking to social theory.

### **Authority, the Nones, and Social Theory**

Because data on the nones points beyond its ability to fully encapsulate them, this thesis argues that the nones are better understood when utilizing social theory along with survey data. It is primarily through this lens that we can continue to add useful frameworks to our foundational definition. Where many studies of the nones take the form of survey reports, ethnographies, or histories, there is no major study that looks at the religiously unaffiliated through the lens of theories of authority or expertise. If they are analyzed theoretically at all, it is typically done so from the perspectives of secularization or pluralism. These studies, however, focus only on subtractive elements, what the nones take away from religion, and neglect the additive. This study will attempt to emphasize the often-ignored positive features of the nones' religious identity by engaging them theoretically. If our purpose is to view the nones in terms of theories surrounding authority and expertise, we could argue that an appropriate place to start such an analysis would be the fact that the nones are a religious group. The way in which some religious groups have been understood theoretically are as structures of power and authority. This is true

not only for the first social theorists but remains true up through recent scholarship.<sup>10</sup> If the nones, then, are a religious group, it would make sense that we can view them through the lens of authority as the tradition of social theory demands. By doing so we will see that authority plays an integral role in the definition of a none.

The role of authority in society is hardly a new concept within the realm of social theory. From the foundations of the discipline of sociology, theorists such as Durkheim, Weber, and Tocqueville, among others, were observing and writing of the ways in which authority plays a dominant role in the social order and how it functions. Authority, as seen by these social theorists, was a glue that held society together. Even now authority is a relevant topic among social theorists, even though the emphasis on authority is quite different.<sup>11</sup> To further apply the concept of authority to religion is, again, hardly a new idea. The foundational theorists mentioned above often wrote of the ways in which authority functioned within religions or the way in which external authorities impinged on religious communities. Weber's notion of charisma and Marx's definition of religion both acknowledge the role of authority. In short, the relationship between religion and authority is certainly noticed in the realm of sociology. All religions, indeed, are constructed in authority, and nearly every religious tradition has been examined in terms of authority as laid out in the disciplines of social theory or religious studies. There are, however, some nontraditional religious groups that have not been examined in terms

---

<sup>10</sup> Stephen S. Bush, *Visions of Religion: Experience, Meaning, and Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Contemporary discussions of authority are often centered around power as a product of what many now call "the material turn" in the humanities and social sciences. See Susanne Lettow, "Turning the Turn: New Materialism, Historical Materialism and Critical Theory," *Thesis Eleven* 140, no. 1 (June 2017): 106-21.



of the way in which authority functions within them. The religious nones are one of these groups and an analysis of authority within this group is pertinent if we want to understand them.

As is the case with every religious group, to speak of the religious nones is, in part, to speak of authority. Yet, unlike other religious communities, to speak of the religious nones is to speak of a seeming absence of authority. To define oneself in opposition to traditional religious bodies, as the religious nones do,<sup>12</sup> is to make a claim about the authority of these institutions. To claim that one's own autonomy as a "spiritual seeker" is more important than any institutional guidance is an assault on the authority of these institutions. The label itself is a challenge to authoritative bodies. From this we glean another definitional aspect of the nones. Along with all the previous attributes we can now add that the nones are a religious group *that is indifferent to external religious authority*. Much in the same way a political revolution would begin with people shirking the authority of their government, a shifting religious temperament begins with congregants dodging the authority of their institutions and leaving their churches.

This loss of authority is even measurable, some sociologists argue, pointing to the survey data collected about the nones. Declining church attendance, among many other symptoms, is something scholars point to in order to identify this deterioration. There are, however, those who see the nones as spiritual. These people might also examine the ways in which some denominations have held on to numbers despite others failing, as a means to combat the idea of overall religious decline; but these criticisms do not get the whole picture. While the claims of secularization theory are seen by some to be falling out of style as religion around the world

---

<sup>12</sup> Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual but not Religious* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6.

continues to have a major influence,<sup>13</sup> scholars such as Mark Chaves argue that this only seems the case because the researchers are focusing on religion in terms of numbers rather than religious authority.<sup>14</sup> While religions globally might be growing or sustaining themselves, there is something now missing from the religious landscape in the West. It might not be secularization in its most explicit sense, but, as we learn from Taylor, something has indeed changed. We could account for this change, Chaves argues, if researchers were to look at secularization as declining religious authority rather than a decline in religiosity. This correction could potentially lead to far more accurate conclusions and be able to better describe the current religious landscape of the west.

With this we see that there are more or less identifiable factors that contribute to the decline in religious authority. And, as previously mentioned, this broad view of declining religious authority is typically localized in the emerging group known as the religious nones. Indeed, “religious authority” is not in decline for members of institutional religions and would not be an object of concern if not for the masses of people who are leaving these institutions. Thus, the nones are often seen as the primary locus, or the ultimate example of, the loss of religious authority. Theoretical work surrounding the nones often speaks in these negative terms of loss and subtraction. Furthermore, the decline in religious authority and the growth of the nones is viewed as working in tandem. While we will attempt to argue against these “subtraction stories” as Taylor calls them, our previous argument stands: any discussion of the religious nones must entail a discussion of authority and the lack thereof.

---

<sup>13</sup> José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Mark Chaves, “Secularization as Declining Religious Authority,” *Social Forces* 72, no. 3 (Mar. 1994): 749-774.

Most of the work on the spiritual but not religious is in agreement with this analysis. Almost all recent scholarship emphasizes the role authority plays in the lives of the nones. Authority, and its lack, is a focal point not only in scholarship concerned with the lives of those who are a part of this group, but it is also relevant in the study of the group itself. What scholars who interview and study the nones often observe is a hesitancy or outright rejection of the authority of the traditional religious institutions. It is also important to note that this rejection is not only of the specific teachings or doctrines of the religion but also of the institution's authority itself. Elizabeth Drescher notes, "For Nones, 'religion' carries historical, ideological, and political baggage that is imagined as having traveled into contemporary life like a grumpy, argumentative uncle from the old country— stilted language, silly costumes, dated music, and an assumed (but by now largely evacuated) authority in tow."<sup>15</sup> From this we see that nones do not only reject religion because of doctrines, even though this does often play a large role in disaffiliation. We instead see that it is a combination of the teachings and the authority that is often a deterrent. Authority itself is unimportant to the nones.

Even Charles Taylor's monumental work on secular society emphasizes the role authority plays in the nones' views of their religious preferences, and of the ways scholars have discussed them. When discussing the idea of a search for meaning he gets to the heart of the issue,

This kind of search is often called by its practitioners 'spirituality', and is opposed to 'religion'. This contrast reflects the rejection of 'institutional religion', that is, the authority claims made by churches which see it as their mandate to preempt the search, or to maintain it within certain limits, and above all to dictate a certain code of behavior.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 45.

<sup>16</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 509.

We can assume here that Taylor is referring to the religious nones. Moreover, Taylor seems to be outlining the definition of this group in terms of “seeking” and “quest.” This entire project or “quest” of being a none, on the view set forth here by Taylor, then, runs directly counter to both institutional religion and to the obedience it demands of its adherents. This opinion is very much shared by Robert C. Fuller in his book concerning the spiritual but not religious. In terms similar to search and quest, Linda Mercadante makes this point clear when she claims, “At base, the conceptual amputation of spirituality from religion is a way to get out from under the external constraints of authorities, traditions, or institutional bonds, and personalize one’s spiritual quest.”<sup>17</sup>

We see from this scholarship that the nones are skeptical of or indifferent to external authority in all forms. But there must be something within each none that beckons them towards this preference; there must be some sort of voice that guides them to this conclusion. There is a reduction of obedience, but there is also an addition of something else. Whatever this inclination is, it implies that the nones are not totally without some form of governance along their search since adhering to authority seems to be breaking some sort of rule or law. Whatever guides this preference, then, must be authoritative or powerful in some sense. Thus, some sort of structure still reasonably exists in the life of the nones or else they would not have any grounds on which to oppose religious institutions. This power, however, resides in themselves as opposed to an external institution. If we were to return to the quotations above, we would notice the importance of personal autonomy in spiritual seeking in nearly every one of them. Further, each of the scholars mentioned emphasizes the importance of “self-authorization” or what we have called

---

<sup>17</sup> Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders*, 6.

self-empowerment when discussing the nones. Scholars such as Wade Clark Roof further this idea by confirming much of the modern religious landscape has turned inward to the self.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the notion that the nones empower themselves is equally important to understanding them since it is the means by which they justify their spirituality and their search for meaning.<sup>19</sup> The story of the nones is not solely one of subtraction. It also brings something new to the religious landscape. Not only has something been lost, but a shift has occurred.

### **Self-Authorization and Religious Expertise**

From all this, it would be correct to claim that nones are not only skeptical of religion but are skeptical of external authority itself. As we have seen, there is overwhelming agreement amongst scholars that this is the case. But this would not be a complete picture. We see from the excerpts above that the concept of authority and the practice of spiritual seeking are at odds. The two are more accurately seen as mutually exclusive. And in the same way that skepticism of authority defines the none stance, so too does this need for autonomous seeking. These two notions are indivisible in terms of defining the nones. Autonomous spiritual seeking (the act of being a none) requires that the authority that traditionally resided in the institutions be rejected or absent.

This definition of a none, which is very similar to Nancy Ammerman's findings in her book *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, then, is a dialectic: the negation of authority from religious institutions goes hand in hand with the ability of the individual to make judgements, claims, and

---

<sup>18</sup> Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones*, 3.

decisions on matters related to spirituality or the divine.<sup>20</sup> The subtraction of institutional authority implies the affirmation of the self, spirituality, and spiritual seeking. This definition contains distinctly negative and positive elements that form the whole. It is important to note here, however, that authority only exists within a community. For reasons that will be discussed further in chapters 1 and 2, the idea of “self-authorization” is an oxymoron. Given the nature of authority, one cannot authorize one’s self after being removed from a community. While I am in agreement with Mercadante and many others that a shift has occurred in traditional religious authority, it is too simplistic to assert that authority has moved from institution to individual without thoroughly examining authority itself.<sup>21</sup> Authority cannot simply move into the individual because it relies on a moral community for its construction. Religious authority more accurately has disappeared for the nones due to their individual empowerment. If this is the case, the negative elements of our definition should be associated with authority with the positive elements being associated with increasing individual empowerment.

While much of scholarship is concerned with the negative aspects of the nones, this study will privilege the positive. The positive side of this definition, the autonomy of the individual to make judgements on matters related to spirituality, is a domain that has until now primarily been under the control of religious institutions and the experts who populate these institutions (i.e., pastors, priests, rabbis, brahmins, etc.). These institutions, up to this point, had been seen as authoritative bodies in making such judgements. They were seen as those with what we might call “religious expertise.” Because the nones cannot be viewed as authorities or self-authorizing, however, I argue that it makes more sense to view the nones as religious experts. This claim is

---

<sup>20</sup> Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 51.

<sup>21</sup> Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders*, 73.

bolstered by the fact that in the present moment expertise in matters concerning the divine seems to be up for grabs by anyone who would like to claim it. Indeed, many are claiming it, and a large portion of these are nones.

The central contribution of this study is to look at the empowerment of the nones through the lenses of authority and expertise. And through these lenses we will come to the simple conclusion that the nones are religious experts. If we were to take the five attitudes that define professionalism for sociologist Richard H. Hall, we would see that the nones can reasonably fit into all but one of his categories.<sup>22</sup> While the nones do not rely on institutional structures the way traditional clergy do, they do rely on their ability to make autonomous decisions, their belief that they have the ability to diagnose problems, their own self-regulation, and their personal calling. The nones, indeed, have all these attitudes when they are related to spiritual seeking. Nones, then, seem to mimic what we could call a religious professionalism in that they are able to act as experts in the realm of spirituality, a realm previously inhabited only by the clergy.

The central question of the nones does not have to do with how religious ministry will survive in a society that does not believe in God, as scholars like Andrew Root claim.<sup>23</sup> This is undone by the fact that the majority of nones still believe in a higher power. The more poignant question is how religion will survive in a society that does not need ministers. How will religion change in a nation populated by people who believe they have as much of a right to religious expertise as the ministers? These questions point to the fact that the nones primarily stand in opposition to the clergy rather than religion itself. While much scholarship has been concerned

---

<sup>22</sup> Richard H. Hall, "Professionalization and bureaucratization." *American Sociological Review* 33 (1968): 92-103.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in A Secular Age: Responding to the Church's Obsession with Youthfulness* (Ada: Baker Academic, 2017).

with the ways in which the nones are progenitors of the death of religion, this study will show how the nones portray shifting religious sentiments in terms of authority and expertise.

This analysis also seems appropriate as we are living through a time when there is a considerable rejection of experts in all fields. One merely needs to turn on the news to hear the mass rejection of expertise that plagues the country. Everyone from doctors, to politicians, to scientists is being refuted based on the simple claim that their adversaries know more, or know better, than they do. There are even discussions occurring nowadays over the idea of lay expertise (a very intriguing idea in relation to the nones) and how this functions alongside traditional experts in the field. While a considerable amount of sociological and philosophical work has been done on expertise as it relates to the public sphere, little to none of it has been applied to a study of religion or the nones. By looking at the nones through the lens of expertise, we will see that the nones indeed reflect much of the qualities of religious experts and should be viewed as experts themselves.

To paint a full picture of the nones, we have to incorporate those subtractive aspects concerning religious authority as well as those additive attributes concerning religious expertise. Where Roof would like to claim that the decrease in religious authority and the increase in “spiritual ferment” make it difficult to pin down the current religious landscape, as if the two are distinct,<sup>24</sup> I claim that these two are not separate phenomena but are actually one and the same. While those negative aspects have largely been privileged by scholarship on this topic, this study will bring to light a new perspective on the positive attributes of the nones, by emphasizing the role of religious expertise in both traditional religious settings and how this expertise is being used by the nones. When added to our original definition, along with all that was previously

---

<sup>24</sup> Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 4.



mentioned, we can conclude that the nones are a religious group that rejects external authority in favor of personal authority in terms of spiritual autonomy. Or, more concisely, *the nones are a group of individuals who empower themselves in matters of religion*. While nones are motivated to empower themselves for different reasons and indeed even empower themselves in different ways, the empowered individual, by and large, is what binds all nones together.

Examining the nones in such a way is important for the study of this emerging and rapidly growing group, but it is also important for the study of religion. If the nones can be reasonably called religious experts, what does this mean for the current state of religion? How has religion changed so that an individual with no training could now claim expert status in the realm of religion? What does the field of religious studies or the clergy do when a significant portion of the population believes they no longer need guidance from the experts and would rather claim expert status for themselves? While this study cannot answer all these questions, I hope that it helps shed light on all the changing religious sentiments the nones represent, not just the decline of traditional religious institutions.

## **This Study**

If it is indeed true that the one common thread between the nones is the fact that they empower themselves within the realm of religion, the aim of this study is simply to understand the nones on their own terms. This study is an attempt to look critically at definitional attributes of the nones and examine them in ways that make sense with one another. By doing so we will see that they have empowered themselves in spiritual matters, that the nones are indeed religious experts. As opposed to many of the studies that have come before, I will be taking a survey of thought surrounding ideas of authority and expertise, applying these to religious contexts, and

finally applying them to the nones themselves. Instead of adding to the ever-growing amount of scholarship that tries to theorize why the nones are growing so quickly, this study will aim to understand the nones from the perspective of religious expertise and argue for their status as religious experts. If this argument helps scholars understand why the nones are growing so rapidly, however, this would certainly not be shunned as counterproductive to the project. This study also makes no attempt to give advice on how to reincorporate the nones back into traditional religion or make value claims as to the legitimacy of the beliefs of the unaffiliated. Furthermore, this study will not tread the well-worn paths of simply relating the nones to individualism, secularization, or pluralism. While I use these concepts, I only do so only to bolster my claims that the nones are religious experts. I do all of this so that we might expand our understanding of the nones and the current religious landscape.

I go about my analysis by firstly defining the terms authority and expertise. As we will see, there is no shortage of definitions for these two words so we must narrow down our language if we want to study the nones properly. Chapter 2 will be dedicated to surveying the different definitions of authority and expertise, showing how these interact with one another, and establishing definitions we can use in our analysis of the nones. We will see here that the notions of authority and expertise are not as related as some might think. In fact, I will argue that there are adequate reasons to place the two in distinction to each other. With this distinction we will begin to see why the nones are not religious authorities or self-authorizing, but rather observe why it makes more sense to view them in terms of expertise.

Having defined the two words that define much of the content of this study, we will then begin to apply these concepts to religious contexts in Chapter 3. Here we will begin to see how simply claiming that the self has been authorized is largely contradictory to definitions of

authority established in the previous chapter. For this reason, we turn to our definition of expertise in order to more accurately describe the nones and the ways in which they go about their spiritual seeking. Before we can confidently call the nones religious experts, however, we apply our definition of expertise to religious contexts in order to determine what religious expertise might entail. After an analysis of expertise in relation to religious contexts we come to the conclusion that there is such a thing as religious expertise, and it seems as though the nones have obtained some form of it.

In Chapter 4, we apply our definition of religious expertise explicitly to the nones. Drawing on ethnographic sources and interviews with nones, we begin to observe the ways in which this group explicitly behaves as religious experts according to the definitions we have outlined in previous chapters. These behaviors, which are largely based on the knowledge and the religious practices of the nones, help demonstrate that they are essentially experts of their own religions. Each none has an individualized religion, and each religion needs what Weber calls a priest. Thus, the nones are the priests of their individual religions.

Finally, Chapter 5 will discuss the ways in which religious expertise has migrated from institutions to individuals. This chapter analyzes different historical developments in thought in order to chart the progression of religion as a communal phenomenon to religion as an individual phenomenon. By observing this shift, we will see how religious expertise was stripped from institutions and how the untrained laity is able to possess it so unquestionably today. Here, as well, we touch on some examples from recent scholarship of ways in which academia has started to view the nones and the lay as religious experts. The popular notion of lived religion within academic circles today points to the fact that not only have the nones become experts on a personal level, but that scholars are now recognizing a level of religious expertise occurring

within this group. It is no longer the case that only the individual recognizes their ability to act as a religious expert. The broader public and even academia is empowering these groups and recognizing their religious expertise.

The loss of religious authority and the rise in religious self-authorization or new “religious experts” cannot be seen as distinct phenomena. They are part of one whole, and both contribute to the prominence of the nones. We cannot solely view the deterioration of traditional religious adherence, attendance, etc. in terms of decline, but must also look to the ways in which other non-traditional spiritual practices are increasing. The lack of authority in institutions, combined with relatively unchanged numbers in religious belief necessitate an increase in religious power from somewhere else. And those wielding these new powers can only be understood as experts if they are so bold as to stand against these institutions. We see examples of this wherever we view the nones. An overwhelming amount of people all across the country are starting think they can mediate the divine for themselves. For these people there is no longer a need for religious professionals within institutions for the reason that they now can perform the function of these professionals for themselves. Indeed, we now live in a nation heavily populated with so called religious experts, a nation of priests, and these are priests unto themselves.

## **AUTHORITY AND EXPERTISE**

We have seen how much scholarship defines the nones in terms of authority. Whether this discussion is framed as a movement from institution to individual or absence of religious authority altogether is not important at this point. What is most pressing is the fact that most scholars discuss the nones by talking about religious authority. The argument I will lay out, however, aims to show that the language of authority is falsely attributed to the nones and their spirituality. For this reason, I frame the argument in terms of expertise and argue that the religious nones, as a self-empowering group, can be seen as a group of religious experts. In order to make this argument in a meaningful way, however, we must first define the two terms that are the most crucial to this study, these being authority and expertise. We will begin here with a definition of authority followed by a definition of expertise. Having done so, we will conclude with an attempt to synthesize these two definitions with each other.

### **Authority**

The notion of power or authority is hardly new to discussions surrounding social theory or the sociology of religion. Moreover, many of these definitions incorporate religious elements. From Weber's famous ideas of charismatic authority to Foucault's notion of power/knowledge and pastoral power, social theory has a deep and complex history of definitions of authority as they relate to religious groups. These definitions also persist into recent scholarship on the issue as theorists even in the present day continue to provide new definitions of authority and its role in society or religion. All this to say, there is not a shortage of definitions or sources discussing authority that we can attempt to apply to the nones.

To begin defining authority, then, it would be beneficial to start with what most theorists agree on. To do this we would have to begin with an analysis of power. Power, as seen by much of social theory, is the ability to bend the will of another. Rather famously, Foucault described power as the ability to act upon the actions of others.<sup>25</sup> This bending of the will can be done through all sorts of means, but coercion is the prime example used in social thought. If someone is pointing a gun at me and ordering me to give up my wallet, they have power over me because my will is being coerced through potential force. I do not want to give up my money, but I do so that I am not harmed. Power, then, lacks depth and can be seen as objective in the sense that in many cases it is universal. In the same way that  $2+2=4$ , if one has power over another the powerful are going to get what they want. To refuse someone with a gun is, most likely, a death sentence.

Defining power in this way is important for understanding authority. Authority, most social theorists since Weber agree, is the legitimate or just use of power. To use the previous example, if I, for whatever reason, think that my adversary is justified in pointing a gun at me and asking for my money, then this becomes a relation of authority rather than of power. In both instances I give my adversary the money, but for completely different reasons. If we were to leave our definition of authority as solely that form of power which is seen as legitimate, however, we would miss something crucial. Where Weber and many of his contemporaries<sup>26</sup> were concerned with the ways in which the state, as the locus of power, legitimates the use of its

---

<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4, (1982): 777–795.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993), 111-116.

power through authority,<sup>27</sup> theorists after him turned away from authority being located strictly in bureaucratic or political apparatuses. Much of the theory after Weber, aside from being more focused on individuals and everyday relationships, is keen on emphasizing that the use of persuasion and coercion must be absent if authority is to be achieved. Authority does not exist where these two are present. Indeed, if one is being coerced or persuaded to action, one is under the power of another rather than authority. If I view the one who asks for my money as authoritative, the gun is unnecessary in obtaining what he or she desires, and I will give it freely. Coercion and persuasion, then, are key in identifying whether one is dealing with power or authority and is what makes these two distinct from one another.

This analysis of power and authority is largely supported by Hannah Arendt. Her essay “What Is Authority?” deals with the question of authority in modern society. While there are aspects of this essay that some find problematic, such as her argument that authority has vanished from the modern world, she does a good job defining authority for her readers. To Arendt, authority is the legitimate hierarchy of a society. She claims,

The authoritarian relation between the one who commands and the one who obeys rests neither on common reason nor on the power of the one who commands; what they have in common is the hierarchy itself, whose rightness and legitimacy both recognize and where both have their predetermined stable place.<sup>28</sup>

From this we see that authority is free of coercion and persuasion. More importantly, however, we see that Arendt sees persuasion as synonymous with reason. The ability to persuade rests on

---

<sup>27</sup> Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 77.

<sup>28</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), 93.

common reason so reason too must be left out of a theory of authority. It is the structure itself that is seen as authoritative rather than the people within it. I see the president as an authority because of his or her office within the hierarchical governmental structure that I see as legitimate. Another crucial component of authority for Arendt is that its foundation and legitimacy lie outside of itself. What she means by this is that we do not respect authority in and of itself. We respect authorities based on their historic institutionalization, our community, etc. To Arendt, one of the reasons we respect the hierarchy is because of its effectiveness in bygone eras. In this sense, we can see Arendt's definition being rather similar to what Weber called traditional authority. From Arendt, then, we see that authority is indeed defined in contradistinction to those attributes that make up power (coercion and persuasion) as well as being made of something outside of itself; authority *simpliciter* is not possible.

As we move away from Arendt, however, theorists start to lean away from the traditional approaches to power and authority. Dennis Wrong, for example, attempts to incorporate coercion and persuasion into his theories of authority. Wrong is consistent with theories that come before and after him in his analysis of the authoritative relation. He writes, "If the essence of persuasion is the presentation of arguments, the essence of authority is the issuance of commands."<sup>29</sup> The language of command and obedience is common in theory surrounding authority, but he mistakenly attempts to categorize authority too broadly. In his analysis there are five different types of authority, and some of these incorporate coercion and persuasion explicitly into their function. This puts Wrong in direct contradiction with thinkers like Arendt and much of the traditional thought surrounding the role and function of authority.

---

<sup>29</sup> Dennis Wrong, *Power: Its Forms, Bases, and Uses* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 35.



As thought surrounding authority continues to progress, however, we come back into the realm of “orthodox” authority theory. A recent example of this includes Bruce Lincoln. Lincoln is one who moves away from the traditional theorists, in part, by choosing to analyze authority in its material contexts. Because of his emphasis on the material when studying authority, Lincoln argues that it is best understood as an effect rather than a hierarchy. Authority to Lincoln is

the capacity to produce consequential speech, quelling doubts and winning the trust of the audiences whom they engage . . . it is best understood in relational terms as an effect of a posited, perceived, or institutionally ascribed asymmetry between speaker and audience that permits certain speakers to command not just the attention but the confidence, respect, and trust of their audience.<sup>30</sup>

This puts Lincoln at odds with Arendt in that he does not see authority as solely based in historical hierarchies or absent from the modern world. He is, however, still in line with the broad strokes of theory concerning authority in that he remains convinced that where coercion and persuasion are present, authority is not: “In actual practice the exercise of authority depends less upon ‘the capacity for reasoned elaboration’ as on the presumption made by those subject to authority that such a capacity exists, or on their calculated and strategic willingness to pretend they so presume.”<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, like Arendt, Lincoln states that when authority becomes coercion it ceases to be authority.<sup>32</sup>

There is another vein in scholarship, however, that sees authority as simply tolerated power, this tolerance being founded in the subject’s determination to fulfill his own self-interests

---

<sup>30</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 4.

<sup>31</sup> Lincoln, *Authority*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Lincoln, *Authority*, 6.

even if it means the bending of his will. In the theories set forth by Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, among others who subscribe to rational choice theory, authority is something that is largely, if not completely, indulged based on interest. Proponents of these ideas argue that “behavior is fundamentally rational in the same way as it is in the case of economic behavior.”<sup>33</sup> I begrudgingly accept commands, orders, rules, because it is in my best interest to do so. We accept the authority of those in power based on the potential fulfillment of our interests, but this is as far as our respect for these authorities go (if we can even call this respect at all). I bend my will to the laws of the land because I am not interested in paying a ticket or going to prison. If we look at authority solely in terms of interest, however, is it so obvious that coercion and persuasion are absent?

Yes, the will is seen to be bent on a legitimate basis based on its interests, but it is not clear whether there is an outside element of this that demands the bending of the will. If we were to look again to the paradigmatic example of a power relation, one holding a gun at me, it is self-interest that motivates and legitimates my actions. I do not want to die, so I do what my adversary says. Does this make the one with the gun authoritative? No, because I can be forced to action by self-interest without seeing this force as just. There is an element of coercion or persuasion that is inherent in all interest situations because my interests are what those in power hold over me. Viewed through the lens of self-interest, I do not obey the professor because I want to be a good student. I obey her so that I do not fail. I do not pay my taxes because I want to be a good citizen. I pay them so that I am not punished. On a broader level, if we view the world in terms of interest, the idea of doing something because it is virtuous in itself becomes

---

<sup>33</sup> Malcolm Hamilton, “Rational Choice Theory: A Critique,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Peter B. Clarke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 116.

impossible. Authority does not command respect when viewed through the lens of self-interest, then, but always needs some form of coercion to back it up.

We can critique this form of tolerated authority based on self-interest through the lens of persuasion as well. Arendt tells us that rationality as a form of dominion over another is not authority because persuasion is grounded in rationality. For one to reason to another's "authority" is thus an exercise in persuasion and consequently grounded in power. The theorists mentioned above who subscribe to rational choice theory and claim that authority is accepted out of self-interest, however, often do so on the basis of common rationality. It is rational for me to obey the powers that be because it benefits me and my interests. But as we have seen, if we posit rationality at all we get into the realm of power relations based on the fact that persuasion is a product of reason. If we would like to move in the direction of postmodernism, we could even argue, as many have, that reason is never disinterested.<sup>34</sup> To posit something like rational or coercive authority, then, does not make any sense; it is rather an oxymoron. Thus, if one is acting out of self-interest in any capacity, whether it be out of fear of consequences or rational calculus of benefits, they are participating in power relations rather than those relations based on authority.

This argument only works to the extent that we can know an individual's attitude, however. If one sincerely follows the law out of a genuine respect for the government and his or her fellow citizen, which is entirely possible, one would be back in the realm of authority. But there are two important things to notice here. One who is under authority in this sense is not following the law out of self-interest, and her legitimation of the authority is deeply individual.

---

<sup>34</sup> One can observe the beginning of this tradition in the works of Kant and chart it through the "masters of suspicion," these being Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, and finally coming to postmodernists such as Derrida and Foucault.

Once we leave behind the baggage of interest, we come to a definition of authority that is much more in line with the theories of Arendt and Lincoln while also coming to a more compartmentalized view of authority and power. Where interest blurs the line between authority and power, blinding the theorist to the distinction between the two, theorists who reject the idea of self-interest as it relates to the construction of authority are able to come back to the original definition of authority (the just use of power) in a more robust way that is able to incorporate the individuals view of what is just. A scholar who accomplishes this is Adam Seligman.

Adam Seligman's book *Modernity's Wager* emphasizes the all-important claim that authority is subjective, and as subjective it helps construct the self. Utilizing Weber's formulation of the forms of legitimacy, Seligman shows that what is most important when theorizing about authority is the subjective legitimation of the will. To Seligman one is not coerced when they are under authority. This would indeed be a relation of power; the will is rather subjugated to inner restraints that are determined by the individual or the self. He writes, "For authority to exist, as opposed to power, the legitimacy of its actions must be registered in the subjective consciousness of the actors . . . The inner subjective experience is at the heart of the phenomenon of authority."<sup>35</sup> On this reading, the one who obeys authorities does not do so out of coercion or self-interest but does so because the individual simply sees them as authoritative. Seligman further ties this into views of the self. One follows orders, commands, rules, because to follow them aligns with a certain sense of self. Seligman uses the example of a thief when describing this. While there are also commands to not steal, I do not steal because being a thief contradicts my view of who I am. I am not a thief; therefore, I do not steal. We see here how Seligman's formulation, by incorporating subjectivity, is able to make sense of

---

<sup>35</sup> Adam B. Seligman, *Modernity's Wager: Authority, the Self, and Transcendence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 4.

authority in relation to power and self-interest. It is only the subjective that gets us out of the realm of power relations.

This is not all Seligman has to say about authority, however. The subjective sense of authority still comes from somewhere. Authority still has, to use Seligman's term, a referent. This line of thought is very similar to what we saw from Arendt: authority *simpliciter* is not possible so it must be grounded in something outside of itself. To Seligman, authority is subjective insofar as it is related to a community. While authority is based in the self, the self is subsequently based in society which constructs authority in terms of moral values. He writes, "What makes . . . rule legitimate, authoritative, accepted, is that it is a collective dictate, not simply the personal power of the ruler."<sup>36</sup> He makes this claim largely in the language of higher and lower moral evaluations, which he borrows from Taylor. On the rational choice theory reading, what is of value is only what promotes my interests. There are no pursuits that are seen as noble, higher, or virtuous.<sup>37</sup> There are then no shared values or morals among individuals *per se*. Similarly, when social relations are read in terms of interest, we lose sight of authority. If one, however, is within a community, value develops in the sense of shared values. Indeed, it is the community and the ontological basis of the rules of that community that give shape to the morals and values of an individual according to Seligman. It is the community that defines the rules that one follows and the roles one takes on if they break these rules, such as being labeled a thief. If there is not a communal referent, no one plays the game by the same rules and authority becomes untenable. If there is no communal referent, no rules or values which a community sees as self-forming, "relations between selves are [only] seen in terms of an exchange based on the mutual

---

<sup>36</sup> Seligman, *Modernity's Wager*, 38

<sup>37</sup> Charles Taylor, "What is human agency?" in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 18-19.

interests of the contracting parties.”<sup>38</sup> Outside of a community, then, one is largely working within the realm of power relations, according to Seligman, because there is no shared moral authority. This also contributes to authority being seen as positional by many. It is one’s position within the authoritative system, the moral community, that grants them authority. Without community, then, it is impossible for there to be authority at all, and this leaves one only within the realm of interests, only within the realm of power.

To bring us back to a discussion of the religious nones, however, we now must find a way to apply this definition of authority to them. We primarily discussed the importance of authority in relation to the nones, noting that they do not recognize the authority of institutions and are rather authorizing themselves. And we do in fact see that Seligman’s definition of authority lines up with certain aspects of this analysis of the nones. The authority of religious institutions is purely subjective, and nones no longer subjectively believe that it is legitimate to bend their wills to religious institutions. This is why it is not uncommon to hear certain nones who are averse to religion arguing that religion is either coercive or persuasive in negative ways. It is also their view of the self that they subjectively authorize or empower in place of religion. But what does an “authorization” of the self look like? I have proposed that it is something similar to expertise. And as the previous chapter argued, we should not study the decline in authority without paying equal attention to the rise in what I called religious expertise among the nones. Thus, we must now turn our attention to the role and function of expertise.

---

<sup>38</sup> Seligman, *Modernity’s Wager*, 6

## Expertise

As previously discussed, we now live in a time of crisis in terms of expertise. This crisis has encouraged new voices in scholarship to conduct studies and write books dealing with the questions pertaining to it. What is expertise? How does it function within a democracy? Will expertise ever be successful against public opinion within democratic states? These are all questions that are attempting to be answered as lay people continue to challenge the claims made by experts in different fields. Before all of this anxiety about expertise, however, there was a related area of research that took on a different name. The sociology of professions was largely thought of as a subfield of sociology that studied the way in which expertise functioned. The difference between this and contemporary notions of expertise, however, was that the sociology of professions viewed expertise as something that is attributed rather than something tangible.<sup>39</sup> That said, there are still important insights about expertise we can only gain from the sociology of professions. Consequently, we will be looking at both the sociology of expertise and the sociology of professions to analyze what this concept is.

What, then, is expertise? Some theorists posit that there is so much ambiguity around the term that it is difficult to know for sure what we mean when we discuss expertise. Gil Eyal tells us that even “the first sustained discussion of expertise was occasioned by the difficulty presented by a new and confusing claim to expert status.”<sup>40</sup> While the meaning and history of the word are murky, there are common threads we can gather from thought on the topic, one of these common threads being that expertise is inextricably linked to knowledge. It is undeniable that an expert in, say, the field of medicine simply *knows* more than the lay person about this subject.

---

<sup>39</sup> Gil Eyal, “For a Sociology of Expertise: The Social Origins of the Autism Epidemic,” *American Journal of Sociology* 118, no. 4 (January 2013): 863-907.

<sup>40</sup> Gil Eyal, *The Crisis of Expertise* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 16.

While it is easy to get bogged down in epistemology here (what type of knowledge this is, is this knowledge attributed or embodied, etc.), and indeed much of contemporary thought on expertise does, we will begin an analysis of expertise through the lens of knowledge in a general sense. As Eliot Freidson tells us, “Within any particular culture of any complexity and size one can locate both a body of knowledge common to all and specialized knowledge that is available only to some.”<sup>41</sup> This privatized type of knowledge that is only available to some, the sociology of professions agrees, is what defines expertise. Indeed, certain theories of expertise have been entirely based on typologies of knowledge.<sup>42</sup> This knowledge is also seen by many to be highly abstract and formal. Formal knowledge, then, is the name that is often attributed to the special knowledge of experts. The experts are set apart from the rest of their fellows because they have access to this formal knowledge. This is what makes expertise very elitist and authoritarian. By its very definition, expertise draws distinct lines between those within and those without. This has led to some theorists discussing these boundaries and how they are shaped, such as Andrew Abbott who discusses this largely in terms of the jurisdictions of certain abstract forms of knowledge.

We are, however, missing something if we say that expertise is solely a form of knowledge that one can obtain. There is a functional aspect to expertise that this definition misses. Much like the way in which we used the word over a hundred years ago, the expert is often called upon to perform a task, provide judgement, or offer advice.<sup>43</sup> Eyal is clear that the

---

<sup>41</sup> Eliot Freidson, *Professional Powers: A Study of the Institutionalization of Formal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 2.

<sup>42</sup> H. M. Collins and Robert Evans, *Rethinking Expertise* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>43</sup> Eyal, *Crisis of Expertise*, 12.



only reason experts exist is precisely for them to perform a function, and this function is as one who uses their formal knowledge to explicate or complete tasks. It is, again, undeniable that the expert in medicine is expected to not only know more than the lay person, but they are expected to be able to *apply their knowledge* to the practice of medicine. The expert not only knows-that, but they know-how.<sup>44</sup> This functional role expertise plays in society is what inspires Collins and Evans to call the pinnacle of expert knowledge “contributory knowledge” because this expert contributes to their ongoing practice. To Collins and Evans, contributory knowledge is so embodied by the expert that they do not even have to think anymore when performing their tasks. The surgeon with contributory knowledge, for example, performs brain surgery the same way she rides a bike. So not only are experts separate from the public in terms of knowledge, but they are also supposed to be separate in terms of their practical skills. With this we can see that another key aspect of expertise is not solely knowledge but the applicability of this knowledge, the fact that this knowledge performs a function.

This leads us to a final general point about expertise. The expert is seen as one who knows *more*, and performs certain tasks *better or more efficiently*, than the lay person. In line with the idea of expertise inherently forming a hierarchy of knowledge, it also forms a hierarchy of the way this knowledge is applied. To put this in other words, these two attributes contribute to an expert being seen as an authority in their particular subject or field. The language of expertise is seen as discourse that is authoritative in the area of the expert. It draws clear boundaries between who should be listened to and those who should not have a voice on certain issues. For example, I take my broken-down car to a mechanic first rather than having my father-in-law look at it because I trust that the mechanic will fix the problem in a more effective way.

---

<sup>44</sup> Christopher Winch, *Dimensions of Expertise: A Conceptual Exploration of Vocational Knowledge* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010).

This is an act of trust in the expertise of the mechanic. But what if my father-in-law insists that he knows better than the trained professional? Indeed, what if the mechanic has in the past failed to fix my car properly, or even made my problems worse? This aspect of expertise is what often brings it under scrutiny in democratic societies, especially in America.<sup>45</sup> The voice of the lay masses is not always correct, but public opinion is more important to democracy than the opinions of a few experts. Democracy is incompatible with technocracy.<sup>46</sup> This is why many still do not believe in the effectiveness of vaccines or the dangers of global warming. The conflict between expertise and democracy is indeed a crisis<sup>47</sup> but it is not obvious that the experts should always be listened to.

Much of the literature on expertise is quick to point to something called lay expertise or what Collins and Evans call the “folk wisdom” view. This concept has to do with the fact that it is not uncommon for expert advice to be wrong. It is also not uncommon for the worries and anxieties of the masses to be confirmed when the experts turn out to be wrong. Eyal uses the example of radioactive contamination of the Cumbrian Fells to illustrate why expert opinion is volatile. When experts were called in to assess the risk of radiation to the land, these experts were nuclear scientists and knew very little about the effect the radiation would have on the livestock and soil of the area. These insights could have been voiced, however, by local farmers or different experts in soil science if the authorities had thought to ask them. Following the advice of experts and overlooking the lay farmers in this instance led to a catastrophe. The experts in this case were very wrong about the outcome, and the local farmers turned out be

---

<sup>45</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf, 1963).

<sup>46</sup> Friedson, *Professional Powers*.

<sup>47</sup> Eyal, *The Crisis of Expertise*.

right. The lines between expert and lay, then, become less defined when they are called on to solve problems. Expertise can perhaps reside in the minds of nonexperts. At the very least, the lines between expert and lay are more permeable than previously thought.<sup>48</sup>

While expertise is indeed a very difficult concept to pin down, these broad ideas that we have drawn from theorists help us to narrow what expertise is in a general sense. Many of the theorists mentioned above would agree with the facts that expertise is an accumulation of formal knowledge, is meant to perform tasks, is authoritative, and that it is not solely in the hands of the expert. While many disagree on the specifics of these attributes, such as the epistemological hills they would prefer to die on or the pragmatic theories they insist on keeping, we have painted here with a broad enough brush to encapsulate those thinkers who reside on all sides of the spectrum. For the most part, scholars from the sociology of professions to pragmatists agree on these basic attributes of expertise.

### **Authority in Relation to Expertise**

A connection between authority and expertise might seem obvious. But we must be restrained when discussing the relationship between authority and expertise. Many would like to jump to definitions of expertise that assume it is just authoritative knowledge, tempted to think that the relationship between authority and expertise is similar to that of squares and rectangles. What I mean by this is that this reading sees not all authority as grounded in expertise, but certainly sees all expertise being grounded in authority. This might be true depending on one's definition of authority, but it is not obvious that expertise can simply be viewed as that form of

---

<sup>48</sup> Steven Epstein, "The Construction of Lay Expertise: AIDS Activism and the Forging of Credibility in the Reform of Clinical Trials," *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 20, no. 4 (Autumn 1995): 408-437.

knowledge which is authoritative in every case. Indeed, for our circumstances we must make sure that our definitions of expertise and authority are in line before we assume that expertise can be seen as authoritative knowledge. We must read this relationship of authority and expertise in terms of the definitions that have been outlined above.

The key insights of our definition of authority are defining what makes it distinct from power. To review, authority is the legitimate or just bending of the will. But what we define as legitimate or just is deeply subjective and comes from our place in society. Authority, as Seligman tells us, is based within the subjective experience of an individual within a community. Authority is distinct from power for these reasons as well as its rejection of coercion or persuasion. Authority resides solely in the eyes of the beholder, and it is constructed based on the moral values one obtains from his or her community. This definition of authority puts it in direct contradiction with power, which is the bending of the will in general. Power relies on coercion and persuasion as well as refuses the subjective and communal. It can do so by using force or relying on objective rationality. What we have called interest calculus, or the “legitimate” bending of the will out of self-interest, relies on this objective rationality and is thus not a form of authority but a form of power. This form of tolerated power is not the same as reverent authority. It is clear, then, that authority resides outside the realm of power relations insofar as these pertain to interest calculus and rational choice theories. When I make decisions based solely on my interests, even if these are my best interests, I am within the realm of power relations because interest relies on objective rationality.

The question we now face is whether the “authority” of expertise behaves in ways similar to the definition of authority outlined above. The answer we find as we dive further into this question is that expertise is, in fact, not congruous with this definition of authority and this

primarily has to do with the proximity of expertise to power. We have defined authority in such a way that it is impossible for something to be within a power relation and still be deemed authoritative. What we will find as we explore expertise, however, is that it is deeply grounded in power relations. In fact, the whole purpose of expertise relies on power relations. While many theorists like to claim that expertise is authoritative, they do so without giving proper thought to the idea of authority itself. Furthermore, some theorists also subscribe to rational choice and subsequently incorporate authority and power into one homogenous phenomenon when it is clearly not. For this reason, we have many claiming that experts and expertise are authoritative when in fact it is simply powerful.

The primary reason why expertise should be seen as a discourse based in power as opposed to authority has to do with its function. As we have previously discussed, experts perform a function and role within society and this is primarily as those who speak with power on given issues. For example, the medical expert's function is to give their patient adequate care in the form of guidance on what they should be doing to alleviate their pain. This is why Eyal tells us that "what experts often do is give advice and opinion, that is, they explicate."<sup>49</sup> This aspect of expertise puts it within the realm of power relations because it deals with calculations of self-interest. The will is seen to be bent on a legitimate basis with regard to expert opinion, but as we have mentioned previously it is not clear that there is not an element of coercion or persuasion present in these relations. In fact, the will is often if not always bent regarding self-interest when it comes to experts. I follow the advice of the doctor because I do not want to get sick or remain sick. Again, it is not clear that there is not a form of coercion or persuasion present within this advice. In large part I am persuaded to follow the advice of experts because it

---

<sup>49</sup> Eyal, *The Crisis of Expertise*, 24.

is reasonable to do so, or I am coerced because I do not want deal with the consequences of not heeding their advice.

Furthermore, expertise viewed within its functional context must be read as a means-ends or social contract relationship which neglects the place of authority within the life of an individual self. Thus, I do not view the expert as authoritative out of any subjective moral value I place in them, but they hold power over me insofar as I need their advice. There is something the expert has that I need, primarily in the form of abstract knowledge. If they did not, I would no longer need them. I view an expert as an “authority” insofar as it benefits me. Without the object of their power, they would no longer have power over me. One might be tempted to think that I am forcing this modern liberal reading on the term expertise, but this is not the case. The idea of contract and means-ends is engrained in the very idea itself. As Eyal shows, the etymology of the word implies that the very term has an implicit contractual nature.<sup>50</sup> Expertise as contractual, then, is not authoritative because it does not construct any part of the self; I cease to care about the opinion of the expert as soon as my issue is resolved. Here we see that expertise also contradicts those other elements attributed to authority by Seligman, these being subjectivity and the role this plays in constructing the self in relation to moral authority.

We see that expertise resists being authoritative based solely on its functional role within society, but I am hardly the first to notice this resistance. Eliot Freidson begins his book *Professional Powers* by acknowledging that knowledge is power and that it is the knowledge of the professionals, of the experts, that gives them power. Indeed, for Freidson all of expertise, the professions, is grounded on the fact that they have power over those who do not have access to their abstract formal knowledge. He writes, “The use of formal knowledge to order human affairs

---

<sup>50</sup> Eyal, “For a Sociology of Expertise,” 869.

is of course an exercise of power, an act of domination over those who are the object.”<sup>51</sup> To Freidson it is absolutely clear that the formal knowledge of experts, and the ways in which they use this formal knowledge, is based in relations of power. Using Freidson’s definitions, the expert or professional is clearly not an authority but a figure who holds power over another.

Not only Friedson, but one of the most prominent voices in social theory in recent years has also noticed the relationship between power and expert knowledge. Foucault’s notion of “power/knowledge” perfectly illustrates the connection between expertise and power. Much like Freidson, Foucault thought that knowledge was power, but his thought was much more complex than the banal platitude suggests. Rather than simply arguing that knowing something gives one power over another, Foucault was of the assumption that knowledge itself was also determined by power. John Rouse shows this by observing, “During the 1970s [Foucault] argued that the reorganizations of knowledge also constituted new forms of power and domination.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, knowledge is constituted in power and power is constituted in knowledge. The two are symbiotic for Foucault.<sup>53</sup> If we can equate what Foucault calls knowledge here with expert knowledge more generally, which we reasonably can, his analysis of expertise would largely place it within the realm of power. While Foucault would have many differing opinions about what constitutes authority than the ideas set forth by this study, it is still important to acknowledge the fact that expertise is seen by one of the most prominent figures in the study of power as a relation of power.

---

<sup>51</sup> Friedson, *Professional Powers*, 6-7.

<sup>52</sup> Joseph Rouse, “Power/Knowledge” in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gary Gutting (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 92.

<sup>53</sup> John Forrester, “Foucault, Power-Knowledge and the Individual.” *Psychoanalysis & History* 19, no. 2 (August 2017): 216-217.

We see from all of this that much of scholarship agrees that expert knowledge is firmly grounded in power relations. While many claim that expertise is “authoritative” knowledge, they do so with a misconception of authority in mind, relying on rational choice theories and the like. If one sees authority as being distinct from power, as we have previously argued that it should be, we have to view expertise as being removed from authority as well. We see from the scholars mentioned above that expertise should not be seen as authoritative precisely because it is grounded in persuasion and coercion. These two concepts, however, do not mix with authority on our reading. Thus, expertise and authority cannot be homogenous and cannot exist together in harmony.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, the definition of authority this study will use going forward draws heavily on the work of Seligman. Authority is the legitimate bending of the will when there is no coercion or persuasion present. While some view authority as any legitimate bending of the will, even if this legitimation is based on self-interest, we have shown that authority lies outside of interest calculus because it is not obvious that there is no coercion or persuasion present within these. Furthermore, authority occurs when one subjectively views his or her bending of will as legitimate. This subjective aspect of authority constructs an idea of the self and is grounded in moral values that are subsequently products of societies or groups we are born into. I do not steal because I hold stealing to be a morally deficient activity. Where some view authority in terms of interest, we see with this definition that this reading cannot account for subjective moral values that inspire some to act outside of self-interest. No matter how much it would benefit me, I do not steal because it contradicts something about my personhood. I am not a thief so it does not



make sense for me to steal. This definition is also seen in contradistinction to power. Where power largely operates in relations of self-interest, authority does not. On our reading, power and authority are distinct from one another.

Likewise, the definition this study will use for expertise will rely on the broad strokes definition we have outlined here. Expertise is a form of abstract knowledge that only a certain group of people has access to. This formal knowledge not only separates it from lay knowledge in itself, but expertise is also intended to be functional. Experts perform a role within society as advice givers and problem solvers. Experts also perform this task better and more efficiently than those without their abstract knowledge. The performance of these tasks and the providing of advice being the primary function of experts. While many theorists would say this theory does not dive deep enough into the territories of epistemology and practice theory, this broad definition will work for our purposes.

Lastly it is important to notice the relationship between authority and expertise. While many claim that experts are authorities, it is not obvious that expertise relies on authority. We found, in fact, that based on its functional nature expertise relies more often on power relations rather than those based in authority. One is often either persuaded or coerced to follow the advice of experts, and this often happens within the realm of self-interest. Many have indeed heard that it is “in their best interest” to heed the advice of experts. With this we saw the reasons why expertise is seen as a discourse that is grounded in power, and as a discourse grounded in power it cannot be seen as relying on authority.

The ways in which we should apply these definitions to the nones is not immediately obvious. We have outlined an argument as to why it makes little sense to claim that the nones are “self-authorizing” as individuals set apart from moral communities, but we do not know at this

point how to apply our definitions of authority and expertise to the nones as a religious group, if we even can. Furthermore, to apply the definition of expertise presented here to the nones at this point is unwarranted because much of their religious identity would still not be understood; we do not yet know how authority and expertise interact with religion. The immediate application of these terms to the nones, then, would be far too hasty. We must still examine whether religion and religious groups can be seen in terms of expertise at all. Thus, the next chapter will deal with the concept of religion as it relates to our definitions of authority and expertise.

## RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND RELIGIOUS EXPERTISE

We have seen that some scholars have argued that the nones are best understood as a religiously self-authorizing group. In order to understand this self-authorization, this thesis analyzed authority and expertise as concepts and found that the two are incongruous. The ways in which these two concepts interact with the none label have to do with the positive side of the none definition mentioned previously. “Self-authorization,” the trait that is positively attributed to the nones by so many scholars, clearly relies on some form of authority or power as it is what enables the nones to reject the authority of institutions and approve of their own spiritual autonomy. Defining authority in contradistinction to power makes it possible to examine what it means to be self-authorized in terms of religion. Here I will rely on Weber and Seligman to outline a theory of religious authority. From this, I will observe what it means to be “self-authorized” in relation to religion. In line with the previous findings, it will be made clear that self-authorization and the authority of religion are akin to oil and water, in that they do not mix well. The assertions of many scholars that religious authority has simply moved into the individual, then, is inadequate.

Self-authorization, in terms of the nones, is the idea that individuals can grant themselves the authority that traditionally resided in institutional structures. The authority of religious institutions on matters of spirituality, transcendence, or salvation now resides in the individual. If we were to return to the definition of authority outlined by Seligman, however, we would be reminded of the communal foundation of authority. While Seligman’s notion of authority is deeply subjective and based on the individual’s internalized values, these values are determined by the community of which one is a part. Authority exists as a product of internalized values, but

internalized values only exist when there has been an acceptance of propositions that legitimate certain actions over others. These propositions occur within a community of people who accept the same “rules of the game.” Seligman writes, “the rules of the game ultimately refer to principles of justice, even if these principles are no more than the maintenance of the game itself or, by extension, of society, which . . . is the essence of the sacred and so, we are forced to admit, of authority itself.”<sup>54</sup> It is clear from this that authority can only exist within certain communal contexts. Everything outside of these contexts must be based in power. The problems with self-authorization, then, are immediately obvious. How does a self become authorized outside of communal boundaries? Can individuals authorize themselves if authority itself requires a community of referents? From Seligman’s Durkheimian perspective, the idea of self-authorization as a relation based in authority begins to weaken considerably.

Indeed, outside of community Seligman believes that authority cannot exist. It is the structure of the community, the rules and laws, that give authority its shape: “It is, to complete the circle, the subjugation of the individual wills to these sacred rules of order that defines authority.”<sup>55</sup> The idea that a self could obtain authority outside of a community is completely contrary to the definition of authority I have outlined. To think that authority could exist in a vacuum, and that it could be divvied out based on personal preference is inaccurate. To think that authority could be a product of, and reside solely within, the individual self is incongruous with authority itself. This is in direct contradiction of the authority that the nones give themselves, however.

The idea of self-authorization, as far as it is conceived of by the nones and the scholarship surrounding them, means that the spiritual but not religious draw on an authority

---

<sup>54</sup> Seligman, *Modernity’s Wager*, 28.

<sup>55</sup> Seligman, *Modernity’s Wager*, 29.

from within themselves and that the self becomes the ultimate authority. The liberal notions of individualism and individual autonomy are very prominent in this line of thinking. But these notions are not in line with relations of authority. Authority, while deeply subjective, exists because of something outside the individual. While we may live in liberal societies that value individual autonomy over external authority, it does not make sense to say that authority has left the institutional realm and entered the individual. Authority by its nature resides in rules and laws that exist outside of individuals. Seligman goes so far as to say, “The most interesting challenge to our own liberal preconceptions on this matter comes from the Durkheimian perspective, which in essence holds not that community and authority are opposing principles of social organization but rather that they are one and the same principle, as two sides of the same coin.”<sup>56</sup> Community and authority are inseparable, so it is not possible to speak of authority outside of community. The self-authorization of the nones, however, occurs outside of communal boundaries, leaving one to wonder if their self-authorization is based in authority at all. These problems are only magnified when viewed in religious contexts.

Not only is self-authorization at odds with authority in general, but it is also at odds with religious authority. Within the sociological tradition, when theorists discuss religious authority, it is often done so within the context of the religious community. Durkheim is an excellent example of this when he advocates for religion’s social reality.<sup>57</sup> Even Weber’s famous analysis of authority recognizes authority only within its social contexts. Indeed, charismatic, traditional,

---

<sup>56</sup> Seligman, *Modernity’s Wager*, 37.

<sup>57</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995).

and legal authority all only occur within religious communities.<sup>58</sup> The idea that one could gain some sort of religious authority outside of the religious tradition itself is, for the most part, totally foreign to the theories put forth by Weber and Durkheim.

But what about charismatic authority, what of the charisma of the prophet or grassroots minister? What of one who begins their own religion? One might be tempted to argue that the nones have some sort of charisma that grants them the authority to step outside traditional religions. Charisma does in fact authorize the individual self in a manner similar to what we are discussing here. Weber himself even recognizes the importance of the authority of the self in the “personal call” in the life of a prophet in his *Sociology of Religion*.<sup>59</sup> But when viewed in light of the social realities of the nones, we see that this temptation is false. Unlike Weber’s prophets, the nones do not come to found their own religions or radically change existing ones. When nones leaves a church because of their own self-authorized convictions, they do not start a new religion and they typically do not find new communities based on these convictions. They often only become more secluded from society.<sup>60</sup> The charismatic prophet, on the other hand, always has disciples. They always form, and exist within, communities. Prophets also rely on some external referent, outside of the self, to which they make their appeals and claims to authority. We see here that religious authority, even the most individuating form of it, this being the charisma of the prophet, is still firmly grounded within community.

---

<sup>58</sup> Max Weber, “The Social Psychology of the World Religions,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 295-297.

<sup>59</sup> Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991).

<sup>60</sup> Burge, *The Nones*, 111-113.

But what of religious virtuosi? One might also be tempted to think that the nones are some sort of religious virtuosi, as Weber calls them. This form of religiosity is set apart from the masses in that those who are part of this group are “differently qualified” in terms of religion. A common example of a religious virtuoso is that of a monk. These virtuosos have in abundance whatever a religion holds as a sacred value, such as the ascetic lifestyle of monastics. Also, according to Weber, virtuosi draw on charisma, which would imply that they rely on some sort of self-authorization as well. Perhaps some nones can be seen as simply more religiously “musical,” to use Weber’s phrase, with certain insights that the rest of us do not have. Perhaps they are not so far off from those monks and beguines of old that engaged in heresy.<sup>61</sup> But, again, this form of religiosity stands apart from the nones for the same reason we cannot view them as prophets: religious virtuosi are still members of an organized religious community. If they are self-authorized at all, this authority still comes from a fixed religious referent with a subsequent religious community. Weber is clear that, much like prophets, virtuosi form communities or, as he calls them, sects. Monks do not exist on their own but belong to a community of fellows in monasteries. Furthermore, all of these only exist as products of a religious tradition itself. The nones, by contrast, have no tradition or community. It would not make sense, then, to view them in terms of Weber’s charisma or virtuosos.

Can authority exist outside of community? Moreover, can the self be authorized if it is apart from a community? Can one solely rely on the convictions of the self to form their actions and call this authority? The simple answer to this is no. This answer is even more true when we look at these questions through the lens of religion. The prophet always forms a community,

---

<sup>61</sup> Two figures who come to mind are Marguerite Porette and Meister Eckhart. The theology of the former earning her a burning at the stake and the latter might have had a similar fate had he not died before his works were investigated.

always relies on an external referent, and always gathers disciples. The authority of religious groups, no matter their western or eastern origin, stems from their communal nature. In the same way that Jesus Christ is not authoritative outside of his relation to God or his disciples, the Buddha and his teachings are not authoritative outside of his proximity to nirvana or the sangha. The nones, however, exist in no such community and rely on no external referent. They solely rely on the dictates of the self. In terms of religion, there is no unified game or set of rules that they all play by and thus no referent we might call “authoritative” aside from individual selves. But when only the self and its desires are authoritative, it ceases to be an authority. For what is self-interest if not an authorization of the self and its interests? And what is self-interest if not a relation of power? Outside of a community, self-authorization only makes sense if it is viewed as a power relation. And this would make perfect sense with our definition of the nones. We must remember that the nones place themselves outside of all traditional forms of religious authority. It makes sense, then, that the one defining factor of the nones, self-authorization, is incongruous with traditional religious authority.

### **The Nones and Expertise**

The nones, as a religious group, cannot be understood in terms of authority precisely because they do not form or exist within religious communities, a crucial component in the construction of authority. Because of this, it is better to understand the nones as a group that empowers itself. This understanding necessitates that we turn to another way of understanding the positive attributes of the nones that resides in the realm of power relations rather than those of authority. The best way we can understand the nones in terms of power has to do with expertise.



This thesis introduces a new theoretical framework by viewing the nones through the lens of expertise. To analyze them in this way, however, we must first show why it makes sense to view the nones in terms of expertise. We have shown why it makes more sense to analyze the nones in terms of power but there is still much we do not know about the source or locus of this power. Scholars concerned with the nones typically locate power in the additive attributes of the none identity and place it within such concepts as individualism or authentic self-expression. These two approaches to locating the power of the nones are well worn paths in scholarship on the topic. Figures such as Robert Bellah and Charles Taylor are prominent examples of academics who have argued for these positions. But where Bellah and his colleagues would argue that the nones are engaging in some sort of expressive individualism and Taylor would say that the nones are simply looking for ways to be spiritually authentic, I believe that these analyses are incomplete. There is something more epistemic going on.

Nones do not leave churches to be more authentic or because of individualism *simpliciter*. Both are motivated by some sort of driving force. The nones leave organized religion after encountering new knowledge about themselves and their religious communities. The nones are motivated to leave religion based on what they *know*. Further, I believe that even those who fall away from religion due to indifference do so based on their knowledge, knowledge being the source of their indifference. It is not solely individualism or authenticity, but the thought of the individual that has been empowered. An aloof parishioner knows that his or her priest is a hypocrite and that the teachings have no weight in his daily life. An uninterested congregant knows that the earth is not 6,000 years old. A teaching of an institution does not line up with what an individual knows to be true about him or herself. Examples such as these motivate nones to leave their congregations based on knowledge. To view the nones in terms of their thought

and knowledge attributes an almost intellectual status to them, and I am not the first to notice this. Linda Mercadante suggests “that the rise in nones is not simply greater individualism but also a kind of loosely cohesive cultural or intellectual movement.”<sup>62</sup> Indeed, her study found that much of the reasons for nones leaving the church had to do with explicitly theological disagreements, disagreements entirely centered around what one thought and knew about the validity of certain claims and how these lined up with their thoughts about themselves. The knowledge of the none, then, plays a larger role in the construction of the nones than many have thought.

If knowledge is as critical to the construction of the none as I claim here, it makes perfect sense why the rise of the nones has occurred in what many have called the “information age.” Never before has knowledge been so weighty and so accessible to the broader public. Knowledge that was once authorizing and safely placed behind institutional walls is now available to the masses, allowing congregants to fact check their leaders from the pews.<sup>63</sup> The power of the nones, in part, comes from this ability to not only check the authoritative knowledge of the pastor, and often dismantle it, but also the ability to now empower themselves with new knowledge. If the only thing that separates me from my pastor is his knowledge on matters pertaining to the divine, I no longer need him when I gain access to this knowledge. The all too familiar picture here is of the one who uses Google to prove why this or that church teaching is objectively false. Due to his or her access to knowledge, the individual effectively becomes a pastor unto him or herself. Therefore, the nones are primarily an anticlerical group rather than an antireligious one, as I mentioned in the introduction. While scholars who write on

---

<sup>62</sup> Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders*, 69.

<sup>63</sup> Heidi A. Campbell and Paul Emerson Teusner, “Religious Authority in the Age of the Internet,” in *Virtual Lives: Christian Reflection* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011), 59-68.

the nones are absolutely right when they argue that power has been given to the individual, this does not go far enough. What exactly is empowering the individual? What part of the individual has been empowered? It is precisely the *knowledge* of the none that is empowering them to leave their churches and engage in autonomous spiritual seeking. Whether this knowledge is related to the institution or the sense of self is not relevant to the current study. What is of importance is the fact that the knowledge itself is empowering. This thesis will continue to analyze the nones using this often-neglected view of the empowered individual.

The idea that knowledge can be a source of power is a common theme in scholarship concerned with the subject, and one that was discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis. Freidson and Foucault have argued that power is located within knowledge. Foucault's notion of power/knowledge specifically illustrates the connection between gaining knowledge and gaining power. One must remember, however, that this knowledge-based empowering borders on the concept of expertise we defined previously. An empowered agent of knowledge, Freidson tells us, can be viewed as a professional, technician, or expert.<sup>64</sup> Much of the sociology of the professions is in agreement on this fact. One who gains power through their knowledge often times is regarded as an expert. This, paired with the knowledge's ability to serve some sort of function, would largely place the holder of such knowledge within the realm of expertise that we have outlined. If it is true that the nones leave religious institutions due to their knowledge, then it is at least plausible to view the nones as experts.

We must also not forget the fact that nonexperts gaining expert status is becoming more prevalent as concepts like lay expertise become more mainstream. As we have previously discussed, there are many ways in which lay people are being recognized as possessors of

---

<sup>64</sup> Freidson, *Professional Powers*, 10.

expertise. This phenomenon bolsters my argument for the nones being religious experts in that it shows that contemporary currents of thought concerning expertise are willing to grant it to those outside of specific institutions. When viewing the nones in relation to lay expertise, the argument for the nones possessing expert status, despite their disaffiliation from religious institutions, becomes clearer. At the very least, the notion of lay expertise makes it far more difficult for one to counter my argument by claiming that the nones lack expertise because they did not go through proper religious channels or institutions.

But what are nones experts in? We must remember that the empowering knowledge the nones are supposedly gaining, the expertise they are accruing, is different from other forms of expertise. The knowledge the nones are achieving is not something hard and factual such as the expertise of the scientist or the doctor. Nor does it come from institutional sanctions such as the expertise of scholars or lawyers. The nones are developing what we could call “religious expertise.” But how should one go about defining a concept such as religious expertise? How is it the same, and where does it differ from expertise in a general sense? As we have outlined earlier, expertise is, for the most part, a product of specialized functional knowledge. If we want to define the nones in terms of religious expertise, then we must first examine what religious expertise is more traditionally, outside of the ways in which the nones use it. Furthermore, we must examine the ways in which religious expertise adheres to the definitional attributes of expertise more broadly. What is the specialized abstract knowledge of religious expertise? What is the function of religious expertise? These questions must be answered before we examine the ways in which religious expertise has been given to and acquired by the nones. Moreover, these questions can only be answered if we examine traditional religious institutions and professionals in terms of expertise.

## Religious Expertise and Religious Professionalism

A good definition of religious expertise comes from observing and listening to the religious experts themselves. To do this, we must first discern who the religious experts are. We can begin by claiming that religious experts and religious professionals are oftentimes the same. As previously mentioned, the term expert is similar to the term professional. This qualifies our search for religious experts in that where religious expertise might elude or evade analysis, religious professionals are typically quite prominent. Following Weber, the sociology of religion has often viewed two classes of people as professionals, priests and magicians. The magician is distinct from the priest because magicians coerce the gods while priests facilitate their worship.<sup>65</sup> Although the magician might have some expertise in magic, we cannot adequately call magicians religious experts based on the fact that they are not located within religions themselves. Their expertise, as one who achieves results for their clientele in a formulaic manner, would be more akin to a mechanic or surgeon than that of a priest. This leaves us with the priesthood as the dominant group of religious professionals, and the most obvious form of the priesthood on the ground today is the clergy. In short, the religious professionals, the religious experts, are the priests or clergy of any given religious tradition.<sup>66</sup>

Claiming that we can observe religious expertise or professionalism by looking to the clergy, however, is a controversial claim. To do so runs us immediately into disagreement. Not every scholar agrees that clergy are in fact professionals. Where prominent scholars such as Weber and Abbott claim the clergy are professionals, indeed even the first profession, they do not argue this point but rather attribute this status and move on without discussing how or why

---

<sup>65</sup> Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 28.

<sup>66</sup> While clergy often refers to strictly the Christian tradition, here I am using it to signify religious professionals in all religions.

the clergy is indeed a profession. Because of the lack of thorough argument, some sociologists now argue over the status of the clergy as professionals in general. It is important, then, to answer the question of what makes a professional.

A common tool sociologists use while answering this question is a scale made by Richard Hall, mentioned previously, that measures the professionalization of a group based on its attitudes.<sup>67</sup> This attitudinal scale measures professionalism in terms of (1) the use of the professional organization as a major reference; (2) a belief in service to the public and the professional's claim that they can diagnose the problems to be solved better than the layman; (3) a sense of calling to the field; (4) a belief in self-regulation; (5) the belief in the autonomy of the professional.<sup>68</sup> A study by Alan Bryman found that applying the scale laid out by Hall to the clergy yielded two conflicting results. Either the scale is faulty and should not be used, or the clergy are not a profession. While acknowledging his study cannot say for sure which finding is correct, Bryman concludes that "there is undoubtedly a grain of truth in both contentions."<sup>69</sup> Similar findings were observed in a study by Thomas Gannon who had a less nuanced conclusion. Gannon, using the same scale, concluded that the clergy, in and of themselves, were not professionals but that they could gain professional status "through [their] occupation in another, if allied, area." He argues this by claiming that a "'Priest' or 'minister' is above all something one is, not something one does; thus an existential, not an essential, explanation is

---

<sup>67</sup> Hall, "Professionalization and bureaucratization," 92-103.

<sup>68</sup> Thomas M. Gannon, "Priest/Minister: Profession or Non-Profession?" *Review of Religious Research* 12, no. 2 (Winter 1971): 66-79.

<sup>69</sup> Alan Bryman, "Professionalism and the Clergy: A Research Note" *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 3 (Mar. 1985): 257.

demanded.”<sup>70</sup> We see from both of these studies that it is not at all clear how we should approach religious experts and professionals. While some theorists tell us clergy are professionals but do little to argue their points, recent scholarship argues the ambiguity and potential falsehood of such claims. For this reason, we must locate a theory that can account for both positions.

Dean R. Hoge is a scholar who takes account of the same empirical approaches as Bryman and Gannon while also appreciating the approaches of more traditional theorists. The conclusion he comes to is that the “Clergy is a profession, yet a unique profession.”<sup>71</sup> To Hoge, the clergy fit many of the traditional attributes of professionals, but they are distinctive in crucial ways. The two critical factors that separate the clergy from other professionals is that they have different motivations for their work and a different source of expertise. The motivations of a clergy person are not based in a desire to accumulate wealth or status, such as the professionals who practice medicine or law. And even those in these professions who are motivated by other desires, of which there are many, are differentiated from clergy in that the clergy are always only religiously motivated. Furthermore, Hoge separates the type of expertise clergy members obtain from typical sources, claiming that religious expertise comes from traditions and texts as opposed to scientific data. Religious expertise is thus a unique form of expertise. These are the two key differences between what we could call religious professionals and secular professionals.

Hoge goes on to argue that in terms of professionalism it only makes sense to call mainline Protestant clergy professionals because other protestant ministers often lack seminary education and Catholics see the priesthood as a vocation. We will separate from Hoge here.

---

<sup>70</sup> Gannon, “Priest/Minister: Profession or Non-Profession?” 76.

<sup>71</sup> Dean R. Hoge, “The Sociology of the Clergy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Peter B. Clarke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 581.

Regardless of the lack of education or the squabbles around the word vocation versus profession, all clergy members obtain some sort of expertise or else they would not be in their respective pulpits. Even Independent Baptists recognize their preacher's expertise in the performance of preaching; they do not let just anyone speak on Sunday morning.<sup>72</sup> For our purposes, then, all clergy members have some level of religious professionalism and are thus partially religious experts.

Having defined the priesthood or clergy as the religious experts, we must now observe what these religious experts do. What is the function of the religious expert? To answer this question, we can turn to Weber in *The Sociology of Religion*. He writes that the priesthood is “the specialization of a particular group of persons in the continuous operation of a cultic enterprise, permanently associated with particular norms, places and times, and related to specific groups.”<sup>73</sup> In other words, the priesthood consists of a group of people who are experts in the performance of religious duties. Religions, as amalgamations of beliefs and rites, require a specialized group of experts who can perform the rites and promote the beliefs of the religion itself. To focus on the priest's relation to rituals, for example, the expertise of the clergy is as one who can administer and perform the rites for the lay masses. These performances are integral in contributing to the ongoing life of the religion and the religious community. The priesthood can be understood, in part, as a group that maintains a particular religious practice.

More than simply being a group of religious janitors, the priesthood is also perceived as that group that provides the public with certain religious goods. In *A Theory of Religion*, Stark and Bainbridge define religious specialists as “persons who specialize in producing and

---

<sup>72</sup> Jeff Todd Titon, *Powerhouse for God: Speech, Chant, and Song in an Appalachian Baptist Church* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988).

<sup>73</sup> Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 30.



exchanging compensators of great generality based on supernatural assumptions.”<sup>74</sup> These “compensators” are seen as religious goods or services of which the priestly class provides the public. These can be understood as the rites and beliefs that ensure certain supernatural outcomes, and the priest as vendor of these is another primary function of their role.

Additionally, both Weber and Stark and Bainbridge include the notion of norms in their definitions. Priests do not solely perform certain duties such as rituals and sacrifices, they also promote and enforce particular standards on the members of the religion. Priests do not only work in the realm of rites but also in the realm of beliefs. To think in line with Stark and Bainbridge, priests do not only provide compensators in the form of, say, ritual cleansings. Right belief is also a compensator in itself. Certain religious traditions demonstrate this, with Christianity and *sola fide* being the primary example. Furthermore, the priesthood makes sure that the beliefs surrounding the rites themselves are orthodox. The promotion of beliefs is still a part of the maintenance of the cult and works in tandem with the administration of rites: right belief promotes right practice and vice versa. As a group that enforces certain norms and behaviors, it only makes sense that Weber argues that only the priesthood is capable of producing a rationalization of belief and a religious ethic. But even the rationalization of belief and a religious ethic are not ends in themselves for the priesthood. There is still a deeper function this group serves. The purpose for all of that which the priesthood produces, according to Weber, is “the cure of souls.” Weber writes, “The full development of both a metaphysical rationalization and a religious ethic requires an independent and professionally trained

---

<sup>74</sup> Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion* (New York: P. Lang, 1987), 94.

priesthood, permanently occupied with the cult and with the practical problems involved in the cure of souls.”<sup>75</sup>

We see from all of this that the proper function of the religious expert, according to these authors, is to maintain the religion itself. That said, what it means to maintain a religion is quite vague and needs further explanation. The most obvious ways in which the priest maintains the religion is by being a functionary of practices, a promoter of orthodox belief, and a vendor of certain religious goods. Priests do in fact have training in performing rites and promoting belief, and both of these yield a strong religious community, but this is not the purpose of their expertise. What this priestly care yields, what the proper end of religious expertise produces, is the ability of the priesthood to help individuals achieve salvation, in whatever form it takes. And salvation, as something that is exclusive to a transcendent or supernatural sphere, requires a religious expert who can act as a professional intermediary between this realm and the natural world. Stark and Bainbridge are quite clear that the real function of religious experts is to “act as intermediaries between their clients and the alleged sources of the desired general rewards – the gods.”<sup>76</sup>

The functionality of the expert, we must remember, is not the only aspect of our definition of expertise. Experts must also be possessors of specialized knowledge; and if the religious experts’ function is to be an intermediary between the human and the divine, we can assume that their specialized knowledge contributes to this function. We can understand the special knowledge of the religious expert in terms of the doctrines of their religion and their religious ethics. Of course, every specific religious expert will possess unique knowledge that

---

<sup>75</sup> Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 30.

<sup>76</sup> Stark and Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, 98.

pertains to their specific religion. The knowledge of the rabbi about correct interpretations of the Talmud is indeed very different from the expertise of the Ulama in Islamic law. That said, these two religious experts are alike in that they both possess expert knowledge in some sort of transcendent or supernatural reality. It only makes sense that the religious expert must be knowledgeable in matters pertaining to the divine if they want to serve their function as intermediaries well. And although religious experts certainly have a theological knowledge of the divine, the ways in which the divine interacts with the world is often understood in terms of ethics. It is implied by Weber that once a rationalization of ethics and taboos develops within a religion, as a product of the priests themselves, it is the priests who are the possessors of the sacred knowledge surrounding these. As such, the expert knowledge of the priests of a religion is often within the realm of theological knowledge of the divine as well as ethical knowledge of the way the world ought to be according to the divine. From knowing how certain ceremonies ought to be performed to knowing how certain gods behave, religious expertise is located in theological and ethical knowledge.

We can locate religious expertise in knowledge pertaining to the ethical dictates of a religious practice. But we must keep in mind that the whole function of the priesthood as a profession is to be intermediaries of the divine, and the knowledge possessed by a professional of this class must be in line with the functional purpose of the priesthood as a whole. Thus, the knowledge the religious expert possesses by way of knowing how things ought to be within the religious practice is also ultimately for aiding religious adherents achieve salvation, in whatever form this takes. If certain religious dictates mean damnation for a person or people, it is the job of the priest to implore the laity to abstain from certain behaviors, actions, etc. Expert knowledge

of religious ethics, how things ought to be, plays a crucial role in the function of the priest as well.

In sum, priests function as ministers in the mediation of the divine and their abstract specialized knowledge bolsters this function. Further, the priests, as a separated group of religious elites, believe they can perform their function better than the laity. As a group set apart from the rest of the population, they are the ones who are the best equipped and the most effective at bringing salvation to individuals. Not only are they more effective than lay people in saving souls but they also believe they are more equipped than other religious traditions at this task. If priests are religious experts, these qualities are what define their expertise.

We must remember, however, that expertise and authority are different. But these differences, like authority itself, are purely subjective. If I am operating under relations of authority, the priest can bend my will to theirs simply based on their position and how I subjectively view this position. If I view the priest as an authority, I do not have to be persuaded of the importance of communion, for example. If I view the priest as an expert, however, it is the knowledge and abilities of the priest, along with my lack of ability, that mandates my obedience. We see here that religious authority is distinct from religious expertise, but this distinction is only present on the subjective level. One can objectively be a religious expert and perform the functions of the expert for one while subjectively be a religious authority to another. But our assertion from the second chapter remains that within the mind of an individual a religious elite cannot occupy both the place of the expert and the authority.

## Conclusion

While the beginning of our analysis saw many scholars deeming the religious nones a self-authorizing religious group, I have shown why this language is problematic. To invoke authority within a group that is incohesive by every metric is a mistake based on the fact that authority is only present within social groups. Outside of the group, authority and social norms cannot develop because individuals on their own can only act within the realm of power which, as we have established previously, is strictly counter to the realm of authority. Unlike certain groups of religious individuals that rely on particular forms of authority while seemingly standing apart from community, such as Weber's prophets or religious virtuosi, the nones exist within, and form, no communities. They are totally outside the realm of a religious social order. Because of this, we established that there is little reason to view the nones as group that authorizes themselves in terms of religion: there is no foundation within this group on which authority can rest.

Because the nones exist outside of religious communities, and thus abide by no authority, we need to find another analytical lens through which to view this group. And because the nones act as individuals and are thus confined to the realm of power and interest, we found that the best way to understand the nones has to do with their self-empowerment. If we are to acknowledge the nones as a disparate group of religious monads we must also acknowledge that they inhabit the realm of power. As residents of this territory, I argued that it is more appropriate to view the nones in terms of expertise as it is constructed on power relations. As such, we begin to see an argument for the nones as religious experts taking shape. If the nones are experts, they must have some sort of expert knowledge and function. I argued, on a very preliminary level, that the nones possess some sort of knowledge that allows them to separate from traditional religions, that their

separation is in large part a product of knowledge. The construction of a none, and the deconstruction of religious institutions, is primarily epistemological on this reading. We can assume, then, that this knowledge that is possessed by the nones contributes to their self-empowerment, to their expertise.

If we would like to claim that the nones are experts, however, we must also define their expertise. To do this, we must first define religious expertise since this is the form that the nones self-empowerment takes. We defined religious expertise based on what Weber called “priests” or the clergy of any given religious tradition. By looking to these groups, we saw that religious expertise is primarily constructed on two pillars. Firstly, the religious expert is functional. The priest’s duty requires that they serve a religious community and perform certain rituals. The primary end of this service is salvation or to act as an intermediary between the people and the divine. Thus, the proper function of the priest is to mediate. In addition to having a function, it is also important to note that the expert believes that they perform their function more effectively than the laity. Having a function, and performing this function well, both construct the functional elements of the expert. Secondly, the religious expert is a possessor of sacred knowledge. Priests require certain knowledge to perform their function as intermediaries, and this knowledge primarily takes form in both ethics and theology. The divine often enforces certain standards on reality, and the priest as one who is close to the divine not only knows what these standards are but also works to enforce them as well. Here we see that the two pillars on which religious expertise stands reflect our findings in the second chapter: expertise is functional and requires special knowledge for the performance of this function.

The argument of this thesis is that the nones are religious experts. With this chapter we have further established buildings blocks, such as a definition of religious expertise, on which

this argument can stand. That said, we are still far from concluding that the nones are indeed religious experts. At this point, all of our key terms have been defined in themselves and within religious contexts; the stage is now set for an examination of the nones as religious experts. In order to do this, we must look to what the nones say about themselves and their beliefs, and examine how these match up with the definitions we have outlined thus far. Only by examining this group closely will we be able to adequately determine their expert status.

## THE NONES AS RELIGIOUS EXPERTS

The nones empower themselves in relation to religion. We have briefly discussed the ways in which this empowerment is largely based on knowledge, on what the nones know. One who is empowered by his or her knowledge is often times an expert. If the nones are indeed empowered in such a way, perhaps they too are experts. Thus, it is worth examining the nones in relation to religious expertise. While it might seem absurd to view the nones as experts, the argument laid out in this paper thus far warrants attention and analysis. If the nones can be viewed as religious experts, our understanding of this group and religion in the modern world could be dramatically altered.

The purpose of this chapter is to utilize certain interviews, ethnographies, histories, and research projects to observe what the nones say about themselves and see if this aligns with the definition of religious expertise discussed in the last chapter. I have dedicated significant space to outlining what religious expertise is so there is little reason to define it again here. What is more pressing is to take what we know about religious expertise and examine the nones in light of our definition. With this in mind, this chapter will largely analyze what I have called the two pillars of religious expertise (functionality and special knowledge) in light of interviews and survey data collected on the nones to see if there are not parallels between religious expertise and this group.

For this analysis we will also be relying primarily on the sociology of expertise, as opposed to the sociology of professions, along with the various forms of data mentioned above. If we examine the nones from the perspective of expertise we open ourselves up to a couple different analytical insights. Firstly, under the sociology of expertise we can view the expert



status of the nones as not socially granted; that is, expertise is not something attributed to the nones by a social group or institution. The idea that expertise is something that is socially attributed is more in line with the sociology of professions, and we would have to view the nones as professionals on this reading, which they are clearly not. Rather, I argue that the expertise of the nones is closer to what some thinkers have called “knowhow” based on function. This is in line with what Gil Eyal describes when writing, “[E]xpertise identifies practical knowhow possessed by an individual by virtue of experience and long practice, rather than scholastic knowledge and credentials.”<sup>77</sup> This reading allows the nones, and religious expertise more generally, to outmaneuver the need for institutional sanctions, educational background, etc. which many nones clearly lack in relation to religion. With all of this in mind we may now begin to analyze what the nones say about themselves in relation to what we have said about religious expertise utilizing the two primary facets of religious expertise: special knowledge and expert function.

### **Special Knowledge**

We will begin by analyzing how the nones empower themselves through the knowledge they possess. One who is empowered by his or her knowledge is often considered an expert. Only the possessors of specialized knowledge may call themselves an expert; it is in part this knowledge that raises them to their expert status. As we have previously discussed, the expert simply *knows more* than the lay person. The subject of the knowledge, of course, is always different (doctors have a very different library of knowledge than lawyers), but the character of expert knowledge is for the most part the same. The character of special knowledge is often

---

<sup>77</sup> Eyal, *The Crisis of Expertise*, 21.

formal, meaning it has been “formalized into theories and other abstractions, on efforts at systematic, reasoned explanation, and on justification of the facts and activities believed to constitute the world.”<sup>78</sup>

In relation to religion and religious expertise, this thesis argues that the special knowledge that a religious expert possesses has to do with theology and ethics. The religious expert knows certain things about the divine in general, perhaps the behaviors or characteristics of a particular god, while also knowing the ways in which the divine interacts with the world, this being understood in terms of ethics. It is important to note here that the definition of theology that will be used here will be exceedingly broad. What I mean by theology, in contrast to many Western Christian notions, is any system of knowledge pertaining to a transcendent reality. With this definition in mind, we see that the specific knowledge and practices among different religious experts is obviously different in terms of subject matter (the Catholic priest has an entirely different set of knowledge than the Buddhist monk) but a common characteristic of the bodies of knowledge would certainly be a formal understanding of a transcendent reality and how it affects, and should affect, the world. It is also important to note that the special knowledge of religious experts is often localized either in sacred texts or holy people. If these texts or figures can seclude themselves from the eyes of the lay masses, special religious knowledge remains safely in the hands of elites.

Religious experts have access to a special knowledge through these texts and holy people, and in many cultures this knowledge has historically been kept secret or hidden from the laity so that only the elites could handle such precious information.<sup>79</sup> A great western example of this is

---

<sup>78</sup> Freidson, *Professional Powers*, 3.

<sup>79</sup> An excellent eastern example of this phenomenon is Mikkyo or Shingon Buddhism in Japan. See Mark Teeuwen “Japan’s Culture of Secrecy from a Comparative Perspective,” in *The*

the fact that the vast majority of medieval Europe was not able to read or understand the Bible due to it being written and spoken entirely in Latin. Only the religious experts could handle the holy text. This has changed with modernity, however. Certain social shifts along with inventions like the printing press and the internet have made the special knowledge of religious experts more obtainable, and thus less special. Nowadays anyone who is curious not only has access to the teachings of holy persons or the sacred texts themselves, but to the wide variety of interpretations and commentaries on these traditions. The barriers between expert and lay have weakened due to the fact that special religious knowledge is becoming more and more accessible to the general public. Furthermore, the overabundance of information allows for pluralism to emerge which in turn weakens any religion's claim to truth. It is important to remember, then, that groups like the nones have access to the very knowledge that qualifies certain religious experts as experts while also having genuine grounds to make their own assertions as the legitimacy of theology in general diminishes. Nothing is hidden or kept away from the public, except perhaps through the often overly confusing, cryptic, or impenetrable language of high-minded scholars. Knowledge has been democratized. For this reason, arguments that say the nones cannot be religious experts due to lack of access to information are inadequate. The none, as well as the general public, are only inhibited by what they are and are not willing to read about religion.

So, the stage has been set. All of the cards, so to speak, are on the table. With the modern inventions of the printing press, and eventually the internet, the public now has access to all of the special knowledge of the religious experts. This now allows for genuine disagreement and critique from the laity; lay people can now readily identify the intricacies of the assertions of

---

*Culture of Secrecy in Japanese Religion*, ed. Bernard Scheid and Mark Teeuwen (London: Routledge, 2006), 1-34.

their religions and legitimately disagree with them. One can now Google a certain theological concept he or she has trouble with and immediately examine it in terms of its value. Furthermore, one can now easily learn of an alternative belief system or worldview and readily oppose the one he or she finds problematic. These disagreements, of course, are products of other epistemological or moral sentiments that these individuals hold to be true. This reinforces my earlier assertion that nones leave religious institutions for epistemic reasons, they leave based on what they know. It is not surprising, then, that as the general population begins to know more due to resources like the internet, the population of the nones also begins to increase.<sup>80</sup> A key insight we can gather from this observation, however, is that the problems the nones have with religion primarily reside in the realm of thought. Nones often leave churches based on ideas or beliefs they know or learn. While of course, some nones leave their religions due to legitimate grievances the latter has caused them, there is research that points to the fact that many nones leave due to disagreements in thought.

Linda Mercadante's book *Belief Without Borders* illuminates that many of the nones are indeed leaving religion due to differences in ideas and beliefs. Because survey data cannot construct an adequate picture of a none's worldview, little attention has been given to the religious thought of nones outside of Mercadante's work. For this reason, Mercadante decidedly emphasizes theology and belief in her study and aims to have the nones themselves outline these beliefs for her. Her study provides strong evidence that it is specifically the ideas that religions demand of adherents that deter nones from affiliation: "Scholars who have studied the factor of belief in disaffiliation have found it to be a significant factor. In fact, doubt often precedes

---

<sup>80</sup> Burge, *The Nones*, 46-49.

disaffiliation.”<sup>81</sup> Not only are many of the problems the nones see with religion conceptual and ideological, they are also theological. It follows from this that there is some sort of theological knowledge the nones possess that conflicts with certain theological doctrines of institutional religions. She writes

Not everyone will automatically expect that theology could play a part in the decline of religious participation, nor that theology could play a part in the development of spirituality. Few assume that SBNRs are discarding religion for specifically theological reasons. Yet in my conversations with SBNRs, I have heard a theological substrate that could well justify their hesitation toward or rejection of religious affiliation and their adoption of other practices.<sup>82</sup>

With this we begin to see a developing picture of what constructs a none, and we see that it has much to do with knowledge of what could be called sacred or religious ideas. In the past, the knowledge of these theological doctrines and ideas was strictly kept out of the public’s hands. Now, however, the public has access to this knowledge, and some do not like what they learn. Therefore, disaffiliation is, for the most part, an epistemological choice grounded in the realm of ideas; one often leaves religious institutions based on what he or she knows about religious ideas.

Indeed, one can further the argument that nones are empowered to leave their institutions based on their thoughts and ideas by looking to the histories that have been written about them. While the group known as the nones or spiritual but not religious is a recent phenomenon, many historians have argued that what we could call proto-nones have been at home in America for quite some time. At the very least, there is an agreement that the lines of thought that lead one down the path of disaffiliation have roots in America’s history. Two recent and significant

---

<sup>81</sup> Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders*, 9.

<sup>82</sup> Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders*, 13.

histories of the nones are Leigh Eric Schmidt's *Restless Souls* and Robert C. Fuller's *Spiritual but Not Religious*. Both books display in depth histories of the nones in America and argue that they have been in residence here for quite some time. It is important to note, however, that these books, which are prominent in scholarship on the topic, are histories of ideas. Both scholars rely on currents in thought, from Emerson and the Transcendentalists to New Age philosophy and alternative medicine, to make their case that the nones have in fact been a part of American history since its inception. We learn from these scholars that the history of the nones is the history of specific ideas. In terms of knowledge about special religious ideas, it would not only seem that the modern day nones clearly possess some, according to Mercadante, but that their progenitors possessed this knowledge as well.

So, we have established that nones indeed have access to some sort of special religious knowledge. If they did not, how could their disaffiliation and history be entirely wrapped up in the realm of ideas? We must now determine whether this knowledge has the same subject matter as the special knowledge of religious expertise. I have argued that the knowledge of religious expertise deals specifically with matters pertaining to what one deems divine (theological knowledge) and how the divine interacts with the world (ethical knowledge), and if we turn back to Mercadante we can see firstly that the nones clearly possess some sort of theological knowledge. Mercadante shows that there is a theological understanding that motivates much of the nones' indifference or disdain for institutional religion: "Instead of a desertion of belief, we hear the formulation of a new set of principles to guide practice and action."<sup>83</sup> We see here an assertion of the ways in which nones are constructing theological beliefs for themselves. Another scholarly work that allows the nones to speak for themselves on theological issues is *Choosing*

---

<sup>83</sup> Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders*, 9.

*Our Religion* by Elizabeth Drescher. In this work Drescher quotes many of the nones she interviewed and shows how they often make positive claims about theological issues. One of her interviewees responded saying, “I mean, I do think there’s something, but I don’t know what it is. I don’t think anyone can be sure, you know? No one can prove it. And I sure don’t think it matters, you know, in terms of how most of the world works—like the government or businesses.”<sup>84</sup> Located within this answer are positive theological statements. Rather than taking an apophatic stance towards theological questions, many of Drescher respondents were sure that we *cannot* know anything related to the transcendent or divine. These respondents believe they positively *know things* about the transcendent or divine even if it is simply that we cannot know anything about it. This sentiment is shared by another respondent who replied, “As far as I’m concerned, community *is* religion. Family *is* religion. All the rest of it – the doctrines and rituals – I think those came about to help create tribes, communities, families, and so on.”<sup>85</sup> Here again we see an example of a none making a positive claim about religious knowledge, theological concepts, and what they believe to be related to the divine. These are just two examples from a book filled with respondent assertions of what they believe to be divine or spiritual, and what they believe is clearly neither of these. One can assume that in order to make these claims, the respondents must have some knowledge of their own to back it up and we see that knowledge on display when nones make assertions about theological concepts. While the religious knowledge of the nones is certainly not as articulate, rigorous, or historically grounded as that of systematic theologians, when we look to interviews and ethnographies of the nones we begin to see a positive theological framework. The nones too make assertions and have thoughts about what is divine, spiritual, and transcendent. And while their supporting evidence is not as academic as

---

<sup>84</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 27.

<sup>85</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 123.

theologians, the grounds on which they make these claims is seen as increasingly legitimate as the authority of traditional theological knowledge continues to fade.

We also see that it is a none's theological convictions that influence his or her ethical frameworks as well. Indeed, it is often a none's ethical values that inhibit them from subscribing to certain theological doctrines such as many nones' moral objection to exclusivism.<sup>86</sup> We have discussed the ways in which a religious expert's theological knowledge often informs their moral judgements; an understanding of the divine requires an understanding of ethics. As religious experts, we will see that this is also the case with the nones. Nancy Ammerman discusses what she calls "Golden Rule Christianity" in order to outline a loose moral framework for certain Christians. She uses this illustration, however, to point to the importance of ethics in people's spiritual lives. This importance of morality is maintained across the religion versus spirituality dichotomy. When analyzing what she calls "theistic" (religiosity focused on the divine) and "extra-theistic" (religiosity focused on naturalistic forms) spiritualities, Ammerman observes that morality is a common link between both. She writes that "The one thing that almost everyone agrees on, however, is that real spirituality is about living a virtuous life, one characterized by helping others, transcending one's own selfish interests to seek what is right."<sup>87</sup> Those without institutional religion do in fact have a moral code by which they live, and this moral code plays a role in their spirituality: "A moral focus is common in talk about spirituality across the religious spectrum."<sup>88</sup> With the examples from these scholars we see not only that nones have a sense of morality, but that this sense of morality is directly linked to their view of the divine in the same way traditional religious expertise is. The way in which the nones view the divine directly

---

<sup>86</sup> Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders*, 75-77.

<sup>87</sup> Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 45.

<sup>88</sup> Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 81.



influences their moral stance as well. For example, if nones exhibit a loose pantheism, they will have a moral objection to exclusivism. Furthermore, we see that it is the nones' sense of morality or knowledge of ethics that empowers them to leave their religious institutions. Here again the religious knowledge of the nones plays a key role in their empowerment.

The nones certainly have knowledge of religious ideas and their own thoughts about theology and ethics. Furthermore, we see that it is their knowledge of such concepts that empowers them to leave their religious institutions. As we have previously established, one who is empowered by their knowledge is often times an expert. If it is true, then, that the nones are empowered by their knowledge, and that this knowledge has to do with the same subject matter as that of religious experts (theology and ethics), it only makes sense to assert that the nones have achieved a level of religious expertise. But knowledge is not the only contributing factor to expert status. A doctor becomes an expert in medicine not only because she learns a great deal of information, but because she has a level of knowhow that allows her to practice medicine on the sick and dying in an effective manner. Similarly, a religious expert must have a knowhow in the matters that religious expertise deals with. We see here that the nones possess adequate knowledge in these matters to make judgements based on their understanding of these issues.

### **Expert Function**

Having analyzed how the nones empower themselves through their access and claims to specific types of knowledge, we can now move on to the second key attribute of religious expertise: functionality. One who simply possess a large quantity of knowledge is not necessarily an expert. This knowledge must have a use or be functional in some sense. Up to this point one could easily make the counterargument that anyone can know things about religion or make

theological claims; doing so, however, does not make one a religious expert. Simply knowing much about God, gods, or spirituality does not qualify one for expert status. This is indeed true. If we were to rely on the field of medicine to provide another example, we might say that one who simply knows a lot about the human body, diseases, or pharmaceuticals is not counted as a doctor for the same reason. We are reminded with these examples that expertise relies on its functionality for its construction and legitimacy. In terms of religious expertise, I have primarily discussed this function in terms of an individual's ability to mediate the divine. What we will see as we continue our examination of the nones is that they too perform the function of religious experts based on the previously discussed special religious knowledge they have obtained.

While it is not immediately obvious, the choice of becoming a none requires that the nones believe they can perform the function of the religious expert. Furthermore, it necessitates that they believe they can perform the function of the religious expert better than those clerical bodies found within religious institutions. These two assertions are undeniable in light of the fact that the act of leaving organized religion necessitates a confidence in one's own ability to perform the function of organized religion for oneself. With this in mind, we will return to the interview-based studies of Drescher and Ammerman and see the ways in which the nones mediate the divine for themselves through a variety of means.

Firstly, we will examine the ways in which the nones view their self-mediation of the divine. Within the American zeitgeist there is what we might call a "do it yourself" mentality. One can observe this mentality in certain popular trends such as DIY (do it yourself) crafts, projects, and TV channels. This attitude, which is seen as a positive quality, is a clear product of individualism and typically denotes, and promotes, one's ability to perform certain tasks on their own. Furthermore, this mindset conveys a certain posture towards expertise, or those who are

trained in the task that the non-expert is performing. The “do it yourself” attitude hinders one from seeking or asking for aid from those who could properly provide it. It is hardly surprising, then, that many American nones exhibit this mindset towards their religiosity and spirituality. The idea that they can determine for themselves what is spiritual, and that the seeking of this spiritual substance is more effective when they are cut off from institutions, when they “do it themselves”, is littered all throughout the interviews Drescher recounts in her ethnography. One respondent, when discussing how he eventually left church, discusses his spiritual practices outside of institutional religion. Instead of attending a service on Sunday morning this interviewee stated, “I can take the dogs to the park or walk in the hills—either of which feel more spiritual to me anyhow.”<sup>89</sup> Here we see an instance of the “do it yourself” mentality. Rather than prescribed religious activities, which were not proving effective, this respondent not only chose something outside the norm, but deemed this alternative activity as more valuable. Ethnographies of the spiritual practices of the nones are filled with examples like these. Anything from reading, to soaking in a hot tub, to meditating on pictures of loved ones can be, and often is, considered a spiritual practice.<sup>90</sup> And the nones who observe these sorts of alternative practices that they construct for themselves always say that they are more spiritual than what they would get at a traditional religious institution. If they were not, they would still be attending church.

In this sense the nones effectively mediate the transcendent for themselves. Every ethnography or interview with a none will show that this is unequivocally the case. While, of course, a Christian might not say that a none mediates God as effectively as an ordained pastor,

---

<sup>89</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 41.

<sup>90</sup> These are activities interviewees listed as “spiritual” in the works of both Drescher and Ammerman.

the nones are not Christians. What they view as God, gods, divine, or transcendent is individually determined so to say that they cannot mediate the divine is rather an argument best left to apologists and theologians. To argue against the nones mediation of the divine, then, is to make an argument based on presupposed religious sentiments and this is not the job of sociology. Those who decide for themselves what is divine and what is not shape their spiritual practices so as to reflect and be in line with their religious views. If I view nature as transcendent, I do not need to go to church but rather I need to spend time outdoors perhaps in quiet reflection or meditation. There is, then, a symbiotic relationship between the views of the transcendent (special knowledge) and the practices one performs in response to these views (mediation of transcendent).

We also see here that the nones believe that they perform the function of the religious expert more effectively than those in religious institutions. That said, unlike traditional religious experts they do not claim an exclusivism or that everyone should observe the same practices as them, but simply state something like “what I do works for me.” The language that the nones often use in interviews connotes a sort of spiritual spectrum in terms of higher and lower religious practices or values. The common statement that something “feels more spiritual to me anyhow” alludes to this spectrum. While each none’s spiritual spectrum is different and individually determined, they always place traditional religious practices somewhere lower in value. This contrasts with traditionally religious people who would hold traditional religious practices in high regard. This is done because the nones believe that what is placed in higher regard on their spectrums is more spiritually meaningful. And this belief is judged and legitimated based on the none’s knowledge of the divine. We see this attitude on display when nones state

I'm not interested in a program with, you know, an executive director and a staff of twenty people. I'll buy a homeless guy a sandwich, you know. I'll mow an old lady's yard. I want to help people who really need help. I don't know that, for me or most people my age, "Christian" means that anymore. For me, saying I'm a Jesus Follower or a None means I get to live as best I can as a disciple of Jesus without taking on all the other stuff that pushes people away from his gospel.<sup>91</sup>

We see here an example of a none who is defining problems within institutional religion as well as giving examples of ways in which his individual practices mediate the divine in a more significant way. Therefore, just like the priest who holds certain religious beliefs and practices in high regard based on his knowledge of the divine, the none holds a different set of beliefs in high regard but justifies them in the same manner.

One will also notice, however, that the above quote has a deeply ethical undertone. If the nones, as religious experts, can judge the merits of certain traditional religious beliefs they can also come to their own conclusions about the nature of institutional religion itself. Like the Christian pastor or apologist who acknowledges portions of other Abrahamic faiths as valuable in light of Christianity, nones also acknowledge nuggets of truth from certain religions as valuable. Therefore, they essentially judge what is worthwhile from traditional religion and what is not based on their perception of the divine in the same way a religious expert would. This behavior does not necessarily make them an expert, but it is certainly a behavior experts exhibit. A commonality among most nones is that they deem much of the morals of traditional religious institutions to be virtuous. There is often an agreement on "Golden Rule" morality, to borrow from Ammerman, across the wide variety of nones which we have already observed. But this is as far as the utility of these institutions goes, and if one believes that all religion is good for is

---

<sup>91</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 36.

morals and ethics, as many nones do, then there is little reason to keep attending services once one “gets the gist.” There are many places where Drescher’s interviewees equate religious institutions to schools of morality: “Religion is a social club. Church is moral finishing school.”<sup>92</sup> Viewing institutional religion as a “moral finishing school”, a view shared by many of Drescher’s respondents, means that one need not go to church any longer if they understand the basic teachings they learn as children there: “It is not something I need as an adult.”<sup>93</sup> If church is essentially something one can graduate from, why stay once you have learned all there is to know? It is important to note that here again we see the nones performing the function of experts for themselves. Through their individual mediation of the divine they deem certain parts of institutional religion worthwhile; but this valuation of morality is again only based on their mediation of what they see as transcendent. Like the previous example, if I view nature as transcendent, those aspects of world religions that promote love of nature are going to be higher on my spiritual spectrum than those that promote human dominion over nature. The morals of traditional religion are only valuable insofar as the divinity the none ascribes to promotes them. But they must firstly be mediators of this divinity if they are to know what is to be praised or condemned.

The nones, then, perform the function of the religious expert and believe that they perform this function better than the religious experts themselves. And as we have seen even those who profess no belief in the transcendent mediate this absence by removing themselves from religion and spiritual practices. One who uses their special knowledge to perform a task is often an expert, and here we see that the nones are using their religious knowledge to mediate the

---

<sup>92</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 31.

<sup>93</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 65.

divine for themselves. Thus, it would seemingly make sense to grant them the status of religious expert.

## **Conclusion**

There are many criteria we outlined for expertise at the beginning of this study. We narrowed down these criteria when we looked specifically at religious expertise, which is unique from other professions such as medicine or law. The specific criteria for religious expertise we came to, based on the sociologies of Max Weber, Rodney Stark, and William Sims Bainbridge, rested on two primary measures. The religious expert, something similar to what Weber would call a priest, is one who has a degree of special religious knowledge and is able to use this knowledge in the function of achieving salvation for souls, mediating the divine. If I want to make the case that the nones are religious experts, I must show that the nones exhibit both of these qualities. I have attempted to do so here.

By looking to ethnographies, histories, and interviews with the nones we were able to see that they do in fact possess the qualities of religious experts. Nones, along with the general public, have access to all of the religious knowledge throughout history one could want. Thanks to the internet, special religious knowledge is open to the public. What differentiates the nones from the general masses of religious people, however, is that they use this religious knowledge to ground the rejection of institutional religion. Furthermore, nones also use this religious knowledge to inform their morals and ethics in the same way that religious experts do. If the divine condemns something, the religion condemns it. This is true whether this religion is communal or individual. The nones also perform the function of religious experts in that they mediate the divine for themselves. This is seen not only in the very act of leaving church to

pursue other spiritual activities, but also by the fact that these other spiritual activities are deemed more effective. Most nones do not only leave church *simpliciter*, but also posit that what they do instead is “more spiritual” and thus more meaningful. The only difference here between nones and traditionally religious people is that the latter have an agreement on what the divine is and the former are extremely internally diverse as far as what they deem divine.

By utilizing the sociology of religion, we have developed a definition of religious expertise. When comparing the nones to this definition I hope to have proved that they do have the same qualities as religious experts and are thus worthy of expert status. Every quality that the sociology of religion has given us for expert status is in line with calling the nones experts or specialists. To use Weber’s term, the nones are essentially priests of cults with populations of one.

Many will still disagree with this assertion, however, and claim that the nones do not belong within the realm of expertise because they lack something like training, institutional backing, etc. These criteria, however, all belong to the sociology of professions. And while we have equated professionalism with expertise it is important to remember Dean R. Hoge and that religious expertise is unique among the other professions. Examining the distinctiveness of religious expertise, along with the shifts in religion from early modernity to the present, will illustrate how religious expertise can outmaneuver certain sanctions such as training or institutional endorsement for expert status. As such, we will analyze these in the following chapter.



## RELIGIOUS EXPERTISE AND MODERNITY

Up to this point I have shown that the nones themselves must function within relations of power given the fact that they exist outside of religious communities, so it makes sense to view them in terms of expertise rather than self-authorization. And I have even argued for the nones as a group of religious experts. But there is a missing link here. How did the nones become religious experts? Is this even possible? What has allowed religious authority to become so unstable as to allow the laity to become experts? What has occurred within religion that has weakened its claim to authority so much so that its power is now obtainable even by those totally outside of religious institutions? If the nones are religious experts, as I claim they are, we must now justify this claim by answering the question of what has allowed the nones to gain this expert status.

I have shown that the nones can reasonably be likened to religious experts for reasons primarily having to do with their ability to mediate the divine for themselves in terms of knowledge and function. But there are obviously problems with this argument in its current form. The understandable rebuttal to my claim is that I have focused entirely on behavior. Sure, anyone can behave like an expert, but this behavior does not warrant expert status. In short, the counter argument could still be made that the nones are not religious experts because they lack articulation, degree of knowledge, or some other quality. I previously claimed that religious experts are members of the clergy, and clearly the nones are not members of this group. None of the ways in which we typically identify religious experts can be applied to the nones; they do not even reside within religious institutions so how can they be experts? These refutations would no doubt also include the myriad ways in which certain traditional religious experts are indeed

different from the nones: they require formal training, must be educated in certain institutions, etc. As I have shown in previous chapters, there are structures in place that keep expertise out of lay hands. It is not a characteristic of expert status that it is easily obtainable by run-of-the-mill people. Let alone obtainable by those totally outside the specific institutions the expertise constructs. How then has religious expertise seemingly been distributed to those who are outside of the traditional systems that empower experts, as I claim it has? How is this distribution of expertise possible? I argue here that it primarily has to do with a new location and source of religion. The nature of religion has changed.

An argument for the nones' status as religious experts must examine the counterclaims outlined above and refute them if it is to be successful. Upon examining these assertions, it is important to realize that there are important facets of this rebuttal that require critique, the most prominent of which is the counterargument that religious expertise requires credentials that exist outside of oneself. But history continually proves that religious experts require no credentials outside of their charisma and personal religious fervor. The counterargument outlined above assumes that religious expertise is static, that it always requires certain qualities or attributes. But religion is dynamic, and we increasingly see that old classifications no longer encapsulate all that religion claims to be in the present moment. The mark for what defines religion is constantly changing, so how can one claim that the measure of religious expertise always remains the same? In sum, if religion changes and shifts, as we will prove it does, then religious expertise must change and shift with it. By looking at the ways in which religion has morphed into something new in modern times we will observe transformations in religious expertise that bolster the claim that the nones can indeed be classified as religious experts.

The primary argument of this chapter is that religion itself has taken on a new shape in the era that has followed modernity. This is not a difficult claim to make as scholars for some time have discussed the changing religious sentiments of the modern moment. The results of this new shape, however, lead to important insights concerning a discussion of the nones. The relevant claim for this chapter is that religious expertise has also taken on a new shape in order to match the changes in religion. Moreover, this shift accounts for why religious expertise is so easily obtainable. If the previous chapter demonstrated that the nones are religious experts, the current chapter is an argument for how this is possible.

The most important way in which religion shifted after the arrival of modernity is that it retreated into the private sphere. With the products of modernity dominating the minds of moderns, it becomes impossible for any one religion to govern the public realm. Liberalism, globalization, and pluralization work in tandem to confuse traditional religious authorities and weaken their claim to public influence. As such, religion turns inward towards the self. If religion can no longer govern the exterior world, its reign moves only into the life of the individual. The self becomes the new location and source of religion in one's life and community begins to lose its importance. Thus, religious expertise no longer has to be found outside of oneself but can be located and cultivated within. Where religion used to be traced to public institutions, it is now found in the self. Similarly, where religious expertise used to be housed in the walls of cathedrals and steeples, it now belongs to the individual. This confuses institutional religion as a moral community, and weakens its claims to authority. With religion being so heavily influenced by individual motivations rather than communal ones, religious expertise becomes distributable to anyone who would like to claim it. In this chapter I will explore the ways in which religion has transformed from a public phenomenon to a private matter, as well as

show the ways in which this metamorphosis changes religious expertise. This transformation of religion accounts for the distribution of religious expertise, and thus accounts for the nones as a new and developing group of religious experts.

### **The Transformation of Religion**

To claim that any religious faith has been consistent since its inception is a very difficult assertion to defend. The wealth of Christian denominations alone is evidence enough of the many disputes between church leaders about theological issues. Using the general example of the Christian faith, then, we see that it is common for religions to shift and change with time. Keep in mind that I am not trying to argue that these shifts and changes are radical or that they entirely change the faiths from which they originate, just that they do often exist within them. These shifts and changes are exacerbated by what I have previously called the products of modernity. While premodern religion did have what we could call petty doctrinal squabbles, liberalism, globalization, and pluralism introduce more exaggerated change that occurs at a quickened pace. Peter Berger is right when he argues that “in [the modern] situation it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the religious traditions as unchanging verity.”<sup>94</sup> As societies modernize religions begin to adapt in ways that are potentially more noticeable and radical than premodern times. We will examine some of these adaptations below.

As we have stated previously, the most significant shift in religion in the last five hundred years or so is its move from the public to the private realm. In order to analyze this, however, we must contrast private religion with how it functioned in a public sense. Charles Taylor and Peter Berger give their readers a good sense of the ways in which religion functioned as a public

---

<sup>94</sup> Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 145.

actuality in their books *A Secular Age* and *The Sacred Canopy* respectively. For Berger, religion constructs the social realities that people inhabit. In similar language, Taylor discusses religious construal's that reside not only in individual perception but also in places that are not entirely conscious or recognized. To both scholars, religion orders and structures the world of premodern civilizations in known and hidden ways. Indeed, at this time "society itself was understood as something grounded in a higher reality; earthly kingdoms were grounded in a heavenly kingdom."<sup>95</sup> In the same way that religion was embedded in the way people thought of or "construed" the world, religion was part of the very fabric of public life. If the society as a whole understood itself to be part of some greater heavenly kingdom, then of course religion would dominate the way in which this people function. At the core of all these premodern civilizations, these authors argue, was a religious heart, and all of reality was interpreted through this particular religion. This changes, however, when modernity introduces new ways of viewing the world.

As we have seen, religion used to occupy the core of social consciousness. It was embedded into the fabric of society and all of reality was interpreted through this central principal. This changes, however, with the advent of modernity. While we cannot get into all of the specifics of how this change came about here, the most relevant issue for our purposes is the consequence modernity has on the premodern line of thinking.<sup>96</sup> The primary consequence of concern for this study is secularization. While there has been much dispute over secularization and what it means, I am not proposing here the idea that religion will eventually die out, as so many before have claimed under the banner of secularization. Rather, I am using the term to

---

<sup>95</sup> James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 27.

<sup>96</sup> For an in-depth explanation of how modernity came about see Taylor's *A Secular Age*.

point to the fact that the core of modern societies has been fractured. Karel Dobbelaere writes, “The sociological explanation of secularization starts with the process of functional differentiation: religion becomes a subsystem alongside other subsystems. In fact, secularization is only the consequence of the general process of functional differentiation in the religious subsystem.”<sup>97</sup> It is this differentiation that is essential to secularization. Where religion used to occupy the most prominent position within social structures, this position is now expanded and occupied by many other bodies. It is not that religion has “lost the battle” to economics or science *per se*, but these other subsystems now have a seat at the table equal to the seat religion used occupy. The core of society is fractured, and this differentiation confuses the power and authority religion used to command over the social structure, and consequently reality. As such, religion no longer defines all of reality because some portions of the social structure are relegated to other subsystems. For this reason, religion retreats to the level of the individual. Berger tells us that religion, by being placed on equal ground with other subsystems, becomes “de-objectivated” and loses the structures that reinforce religious belief: “there are always all those others that refuse to confirm the religious world in question.”<sup>98</sup> The only move religion can make in this situation is to “subjectivize” itself. It is only in the realm of the subjective that religion can now reside and dominate as it used to over the public, over the objective. Berger writes that religion’s “‘reality’ becomes a private affair of individuals, that is, loses the quality of self-evident intersubjective plausibility – thus one ‘cannot really talk’ about religion anymore. And their ‘reality,’ insofar as it is still maintained by the individual, is apprehended as being

---

<sup>97</sup> Karel Dobbelaere, “The Meaning and Scope of Secularization,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Peter B. Clarke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 600-601.

<sup>98</sup> Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 151.

rooted within the consciousness of the individual.”<sup>99</sup> After modernity, it is clear from Berger, there is nowhere else for religion to go. As an all-encompassing worldview, religion must abandon the public realm and shift to the individual subjective level if it is to continue to survive after the differentiating and pluralizing effects of modernity on social consciousness. This shift, and subsequently religion being seen as a private affair, is recognized by not only Berger, but by most scholarship on the issue.

It is important to recognize here that there are others who might refute certain claims about religion in public life such as José Casanova.<sup>100</sup> These refutations would point to the fact that religion still holds an immense influence over the public realm, so it does not make sense to simply say that religion is no longer present there. And of course, this response would be correct. Modernity has still seen religion play an extremely active role in public life and discourse, as Casanova rightly and accurately shows. But it is important to recognize the motivations behind religion’s role in the public square, what is driving religion into the public sphere. Berger’s assertion of religion’s retreat into the private still holds against Casanova’s analysis because there is no way Casanova can disprove the individual motivations of religious adherents. Furthermore, Casanova cannot adequately convince readers that religion still occupies its premodern prominence within modern social structures. Sure, religion is active in the public realm, but this is categorically different from the premodern social activity of religion; religion can be seen in public, but it is no longer objective reality. In modernity, religion is active in public life insofar as religious individuals make it so. The public, as an amalgamation of individuals, is influenced by religion, but religion still only holds sway on the individual level. Religion plays a role in public life as a product of religious individuals, but these individuals

---

<sup>99</sup> Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 152.

<sup>100</sup> Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*.

cannot reconstruct the religious realities of the past. Therefore, to say that religion has not shifted to the private sphere because it is still active in the public realm does nothing to disprove the religious shift itself.

This shift, many scholars would agree, began with the Protestant Reformation. And while not all scholars would agree on the individualizing and secularizing influences the Reformation had on the west, enough work has been done by scholars like Brad S. Gregory to show that the Reformation did indeed have some unintended consequences.<sup>101</sup> That said, to observe the changing shape of religion historically beginning all the way back at the Reformation would be a daunting task, and one that would be too large for me to attempt here. But for the purposes of this argument, it is still important that there is at least some discussion of how religious sentiments have changed since the pre-Reformation era. For this reason, I will be examining developments in religious thought from the late nineteenth century up to the present within the American context using broad strokes. Because the nones are a predominantly modern American phenomenon, the timeframe and setting are the most appropriate for charting a change in religious sentiment across America's history.

According to Nathan O. Hatch in *The Democratization of American Christianity*, one of the most important events that shaped America's religious trajectory was the Revolutionary War.<sup>102</sup> This event came at the end of the Enlightenment and was fueled by many of the ideas this intellectual movement put forward. Robert C. Fuller writes that "the Age of Reason instilled confidence in every person's potential for greater understanding, hope for the continued moral progress of the human race, and an inspiring vision that we are all sons and daughters of a

---

<sup>101</sup> Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2012).

<sup>102</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 5.



rational, progressive deity.”<sup>103</sup> These ideas, along with the general liberalism that was developing at this time, energized the American revolt and eventual victory. Once America was freed from its oppressors, however, these ideas did not dissipate. The ideas that drove Americans to revolution took root in the cultural ethos in a profound and lasting manner.

The American victory inspired the common people. The triumph over the British was the ultimate validation that everyday citizens were just as capable of running their own country, forming their own institutions, and organizing their religions as the elites were. Hatch tells us that “the Revolution dramatically expanded the circle of people who considered themselves capable of thinking for themselves about issues of freedom, equality, sovereignty, and representation.”<sup>104</sup> This event not only had an impact on the ways in which Americans would choose to govern themselves, but it also had an impact on the ways in which they conducted their religious lives. The spirit of democracy was so fervent that it crept into the Christianity of early America, causing American religion to become less about “the specifics of polity and governance and more [about] the incarnation of the church in popular culture.”<sup>105</sup> As the nation became more democratic, so too did Christianity: religion became popular. And as the church became a church “of the people,” we began to see religion taking on a new shape. Enlightenment liberalism and the American victory over the British influenced Americans towards a self-confidence that was not present before these events. This self-confidence, when it came in contact with religion, entailed leaders relying less on external institutions for guidance and credibility, and more on personal inclinations guided by the supernatural. While “individual religion” as something distinct from organized religion was not fully formed at this time (all of

---

<sup>103</sup> Fuller, *Spiritual But Not Religious*, 19.

<sup>104</sup> Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 6.

<sup>105</sup> Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 9.

these self-confident American's still held to their Christian identity), the years following the Revolution displayed the beginning of a line of thinking in American religion that advocated for one's reliance and trust in one's own intuitions over against institutions. Religion became more accessible to the common people, but it is only made so because of a high emphasis on individual autonomy. Thus, religion began its move from public to individual.

These religious sentiments continued to have a strong hold on American life long after the Revolution. Plenty of thinkers in American history have advocated for the importance of individual sovereignty as it relates to religion, one of the most prominent being William James, who advocated for the study of religion entirely from an individual perspective as opposed to a social or communal outlook.<sup>106</sup> That said, the American populace, while still holding tight to self-confident individualism, for the most part continued to identify with traditional religions, i.e., Christianity. Another watershed moment in America's religious history occurred in the 1960's, and the events of this decade inspired religious Americans to not only trust in themselves but expanded their choices of traditions to identify with. If the nineteenth century emphasized individual self-confidence, the 1960's emphasized and expanded individual choice. Wade Clark Roof writes, "The 1960s were an era of expanding horizons," and while many of these horizons had to do with changing social norms, they also influenced religious norms. In Roof's analysis of the baby boomers and their children, he identifies choice as the crucial component of their religious lives:

Many within this generation who dropped out of churches and synagogues years ago are now shopping around for a congregation. They move freely in and out, across religious boundaries; many combine elements from various traditions to

---

<sup>106</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002).

create their own personal, tailor-made meaning systems. Choice, so much a part of life for this generation, now expresses itself in dynamic and fluid religious styles.<sup>107</sup>

It is important to see here that Roof is not only discussing choice as it relates to what belief systems to ascribe to, but also choice in terms of what elements of a belief system one will use for their own spiritual lives. Influenced by American individualism and self-confidence, individuals can now enter into and leave religious institutions as individuals, picking and choosing what is meaningful for them and leaving the rest. This line of thinking promotes an approach to religion that was not entirely present before the 1960's in the broader American populace. Religion becomes so individualized that it is now possible to attend a Christian church without being a Christian. What has become primary is the individual and his or her own belief system. Of course, traditional religions influence these belief systems, but the tradition itself becomes less of a foundation for life and more of a tool for individual spirituality. Here again we see the shape of religion changing along with religious sentiments in America leaning more in favor of "individual religion."

With this history in mind, it is hardly surprising that religion in 21<sup>st</sup> century America is almost completely individualized. It is in the wake of the 1960's and the baby boomers that we see the first big emphasis on "spirituality" over against "religion" in America. When one views religion as a tool for constructing individual spiritual belief systems, the importance of the religious community is displaced yet again. With this we see that religious thought has moved so far away from the public religions of premodernity that it is not only being viewed as separate from the entire public realm but that even the church in the private sphere has become too

---

<sup>107</sup> Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 5.

suffocating. Religion is now seen by many as so individually motivated that it has started to be thought of as totally distinct from community in general. For many, religion has left the building.

Religion has not only been pushed out of the public realm in terms of its objective truth, but is slowly being pushed out of religious institutions as well, to the point that religion is hardly being seen as a communal practice at all. From these brief examples we see that Philip Rieff is correct when he writes, “The best spirits of the twentieth century have thus expressed their conviction that the original innocence, which to earlier periods was a sinful conceit, the new center, which can be held even as communities disintegrate, is the self.”<sup>108</sup> Church and state have been separated, making religion independent and private; but now we see there is also a separation of church and religion, or more accurately, church and spirituality. No longer are private institutions good enough. It is only the self which can facilitate religious life and practice. It is only within the self where “true religion” can be located and can flourish. With reference to America’s religious history, we see that the movement of religion from public to private is so complete that it has drawn completely into the individual self. By observing this movement, we observe the changing nature of religion. What was objective reality now dwells only in the self.

### **Religious Expertise and Individual Religion**

From this brief historical analysis, we begin to see that the nature of religion has certainly changed. Interestingly there has been a steady move of religion from not only the public realm, but also from the private realm. After modernity, religion can no longer construct and maintain the fabric of social life. It can no longer be the core of social consciousness. For this reason, religion moves into the private sphere. Church and state are separated, and religion is now one

---

<sup>108</sup> Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 5.

among many institutions that occupies this core of the social imagination. But even here we see that individualism is so prominent that religion is leaving the private sphere as well. Not even the private religious institutions have a claim to all that religion claims to be in the present day. Religion is becoming, for many, entirely individual. This “individual religion,” or what many call spirituality, is that religion which is so predominant in groups like the nones.

It is clear, then, that religion has changed shape since its premodern form. And if religion is changing, so too must religious expertise. This would mean that modern day forms of religious expertise would reflect the move towards individual religion we have just charted. In the same way that religion has left institutions for many, so too would religious expertise. Religious experts would no longer have to be only those who institutions sanction or ordain, but also those who individually determine something like a calling for themselves. Here we also begin to see why religious expertise is so unique. Among all of the professions, the professional bodies associated with religion have the most nuance and malleability. And this flexibility is a direct consequence of religion itself being so dynamic in the years following modernity. Dean R. Hoge was indeed correct when he claimed that “the clergy is a profession, but a unique profession.”

If we would like to see a change in religious expertise in response to the dramatic change in religion we have just plotted, we could look to the religious experts at each point in time from our previous examples to see if they reflect the modern American emphasis on the individual. Furthermore, we would be able to notice the forms in which this emphasis on individual feeling was taking shape within religious expertise itself. It is important to note here that while I will be charting certain changes in religious expertise, these changes are not the same across all religions or denominations. Of course, conservative religious traditions like Catholicism or Orthodox Judaism will maintain their traditional standards for expert status. What I am attempting to show

here, however, is that the occurrence of a change within any religious tradition's view of religious expertise at all points towards a path of expert status being easily obtainable by the laity. While yes, a degree from an Ivy League school has more merit for many, one can still get a degree online from a school with a shoddy reputation. Often-times one even gets this degree for less time and energy. Qualifications for education are thus pluralized, and the Harvard graduate has essentially the same credentials as anyone else. In the same way, there are still going to be religious institutions that require much of their experts, but this does not detract from the fact that there is a growing number of religious groups that require little to obtain expert status and that this pluralizes religious expertise. It is the fact that a change is occurring *at all* that is relevant, not that it is occurring across the board.

If we were to return to Hatch, we would see that as a product of their revolution and the popular notions of sovereignty and liberty, Americans began to change the way they viewed their religious experts. Hatch identifies three key characteristics of early American Christianity: rejection of traditional authority, empowering the religious feelings of ordinary people, and religious outsiders being bold in their claims to authority. It goes without saying that all of these examples have a clear connection to our discussion of the nones thus far. We see here that in terms of expertise and laity, the playing field is leveling dramatically. Hatch writes,

They denied the age-old distinction that set the clergy apart as a separate order of men, and they refused to defer to learned theologians and traditional orthodoxies . . . these movements empowered ordinary people by taking their deepest spiritual impulses at face value rather than subjecting them to the scrutiny of orthodox doctrine and the frowns of respectable clergymen.<sup>109</sup>

---

<sup>109</sup> Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 9-10.

The revolutionary fervor of this time empowered the common people. Hatch's book is filled with episodes in early American history where religious passions, influenced by individualism, won out over expert knowledge. To early Americans, religious experts, despite all their authority, training, and knowledge, were no longer set apart from common people. Furthermore, the weight that traditional theological learning once carried was waning. It was no longer important what the church had authoritatively commanded about certain doctrines. What was now of prime importance were the thoughts and feelings of the people *despite* expert opinion. And the common people of this time viewed themselves in such high regard, riding the highs of the Revolution, that they clearly believed they had adequate knowledge of religious matters and could perform the function of religious experts for themselves. Orthodoxy and tradition begin to diminish as the individual and her passions come to the fore. It is important to note, again, that American religion still, for the most part, identified itself as a part of Christianity. That said, we see here that religious expertise is falling out of repute among the people, and that the standard for what makes a religious expert is beginning to decline.

This decline is consistent in American religion right up to the 1960s. And again, it is in the sixties that we find another watershed moment for religious expertise. It is in this era and the years following that we begin to see a distrust in American institutions. From the Vietnam War to the Civil Rights movements there is an evident anti-institutionalism developing across America, all of this culminating in the Watergate Scandal. It is important to remember that institutions are primarily populated by experts. One could argue that it is the expertise that is housed within institutions that gives them their power and authority over the public. Once one becomes skeptical of institutions, however, everyone inside them becomes suspect as well.

American religion is no exception to this. There has been a steady decline in trust of religious institutions for some time and this decline has led to a general skepticism of religious experts located within institutions.<sup>110</sup> This can lead one to totally rejecting religious experts, as many did after the *Boston Globe* ran its stories about the sexual abuse caused by Catholic priests, or totally rejecting expertise.<sup>111</sup> Jeff Todd Titon's *Powerhouse For God* presents a good example of an American church that not only does not hold to traditional orthodox teachings about religious expertise, but actively resists more traditional forms of religious expertise that rely on training and institutions. This church has pastors with no formal religious education preaching and teaching on the Bible every Sunday, and these church leaders also condemn the more traditional Methodists down the road. After 1960 one sees a loss of trust in institutions caused a noticeable decline in the mark of, and respect for, religious expertise.

This brings us to the present situation in which a third of the American population identifies as religious nones. And it is only in recent years that we begin to see religion's amputation from institutions altogether. Before this, those who relied on the self for their religious qualifications were still largely under the Christian banner. Now, however, we see that many of those who practice individual religion do so outside the bounds of churches. If contemporary religious sentiments are placing true religion outside the walls of institutions, where does that leave religious expertise? The only logical conclusion is that expertise too must exit the institutions. With the growth of the nones we see the total separation of religion from institutions. If true religion is found only within the self, only the individual can determine

---

<sup>110</sup> John P. Hoffmann, "Confidence in Religious Institutions and Secularization: Trends and Implications," *Review of Religious Research* 39, no. 4 (1998): 321-43.

<sup>111</sup> Ryan P. Burge cites loss of trust as a potential source for the growth of the nones in his book. Burge, *The Nones*, 58-61.



expertise. Anyone can be an expert, and the standards for religious expertise are all but eliminated.

Having briefly analyzed religious expertise through certain currents in religious thought we can see that *the standards for expert status have been increasingly lowering*. If we were to examine the requirement of religious experts from premodern times, primarily Catholic priests, and compare them to their charismatic counterparts, there would be a stark contrast in terms of conditions that need to be met in order for one to mediate the divine properly. There is no comparing the empowered charismatic inclinations of Pentecostal preachers and the careful of study of authoritative church teachings by the Catholic priests. And these two are even within the same religious tradition. It is obvious that the shape of religion changed within the last five hundred years, but I believe it is also obvious that the shape of religious expertise has been changing as well. And although certain traditional religions cling to their qualifications of expertise, the promotion of lay people to expert status in the pulpit anywhere pluralizes and confuses religious expertise everywhere. Thus, the fact that the standard has lowered at all points to a general decline.

The decline in religious expertise has not been without its consequences. As I previously mentioned, the differences in qualifications for expert status across religious boundary lines only furthers the descent of religious expertise into oblivion. The pluralizing effect of different communities promoting people to expert status based on disparate requirements diminishes the value of these requirements. If certain groups require much of their experts while other groups require little, people begin to get confused as to the legitimacy of the requirements in general for constructing expertise. And if even the traditionally religious people cannot agree on how to properly mediate the transcendent, one can only take it upon his or herself to serve this function.

Theological education, which was once seen as the cornerstone of religious expertise, is deteriorating to the point that some religious people no longer find it meaningful. I pointed to examples previously of Christian denominations that do not require their leaders have an education in theology, let alone those who shun traditional theological learning. And if not even the religious people view theological learning as valuable, the relevancy of the discourse, especially those authoritative voices within it, is going to diminish as well. The reputation of academic theology is dwindling, so to say that a none is disqualified from expert status based on lack of relevant theological knowledge is a nonstarter. What is “relevant” theological knowledge if even certain religious people do not see a need for it?

An additional consequence of this decline is that expert status is being distributed wholesale. We see this clearly when we look to the nones. Many take the confusion created by the pluralizing effects of this decline in expertise and use it to empower themselves without question. But even within religious institutions we see similar distributions of expertise. An example of this is the popular notion of lived religion in religious studies scholarship. This scholarly movement turns away from the pulpit, and what is being taught there, to examine specifically the lay and how they think about their religious practices. By doing so, scholars who subscribe to this movement have included the laity in discussion concerning the definition of religion. No longer do only the learned religious experts get to define their practice. This is not necessarily problematic on its face, but we can see how this academic movement is a product of the wider decline of religious expertise. Academia’s empowering of congregants, who often know little of their religious tradition, to make bold claims about the nature of their religion or religion in general is clearly a result of the general decline of the standard for religious expertise.

If one would still like to argue that the nones are not experts based on their lack of formal training, this could be contested based on the views that lived religion puts forth. The idea of lived religion,<sup>112</sup> looking to the laity as the source of true religion, drastically changes what we mean by special religious knowledge. If lived religion is now true religion, the laity too have achieved a form of religious expertise. Meaning, the laity have achieved a degree of “religious training” adequate enough for scholars to look to them for guidance on questions pertaining to religious issues. If scholars are ready to qualify the laity in such a way, why would they refuse the nones this status?

## **Conclusion**

If religion changes, so too must religious expertise. I have attempted to show that the shape of religion has transformed from its premodern structure primarily in the form of its retreat from the public realm and its subjectivation within the individual. This change can be observed not only in sociology but also in currents of theological thought. And with this change in religion comes an inevitable change in religious expertise. In order to reflect religion’s now individual character, religious expertise begins to morph into an individualistic phenomenon. This change can also be charted through certain currents of religious thought though not as explicitly. Religious expertise becomes individually determined, and the mark of expertise becomes based on feelings, passions, etc. Because of this, the mark of what makes a religious expert becomes so individually determined as to the point of meaninglessness. Religious expertise is pluralized, and this confuses any and all claims to this status. In the wake of this confusion, we have the nones emerging, and because religious expertise is in a state of anarchy, there are no agreed upon rules

---

<sup>112</sup> Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

(aside from those laid out in Chapter 3) that say they cannot claim expert status. Thus, we can see them emerging as religious experts in their own right.

It is indeed possible for the nones to be considered religious experts based on the current state of religion in general. The reason religious expertise can now reside outside of institutions is because religion has indeed left them for so many; for these people much of religion is now seen as residing outside church walls. One sees this on clear display when they see the rapid growth of groups like the nones and the prominence of individual religion even within the lives of traditionally religious people. Individual religion does not define all of religion. There are individualistic elements of certain religions, and some denominations have certainly taken more to individualism than others, but these are exceptions rather than rules. Of course, there are still requirements of religious experts across world religions and more traditional religions will require more of their experts. And although pluralism might attempt to confuse these for some, there are still many who believe that the requirements of expertise do authorize their religious experts. But the nones, however, are not experts in Christianity or any other traditional religion. Therefore, they do not have to receive the training traditional religious experts do. It would make little sense to argue that the nones need formal Christian training, for example, to be considered experts because the nones are not Christians. Furthermore, to say they need any traditional religious training at all relegates them to a specific religion and cuts them off from all they see to be spiritually significant. The nones belong to that new religion we have seen developing in the years following modernity: individual religion or a religion of the self. In the same way that there are religious experts across all religious boundary lines, there are also experts in individual religion. But what does an expert in individual religion look like? Who are the priests of individual religion? These would be the nones.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the argument presented in this thesis, I believe that the nones are indeed religious experts. And while the nones being deemed experts might cause some scholars to think more deeply about this group, others could certainly come away from this thesis thinking “so what?” To claim that a new and developing religious group is made up of experts is not an earth-shattering claim for the study of religion. But I believe this thesis sheds light on certain trends and developments within religious life and the study of religion that are increasingly relevant for the academic discipline. Throughout the work, I have alluded to the significance of expert status within religious circles even outside the scope of the nones. The role of expertise within religion, a topic that is largely neglected by scholarship, is becoming increasingly important for the very reason that the nones are growing. I believe this thesis shows that the nones are not a sign of the death of religion but rather point to shifting religious sentiments concerning religious authorities and experts. To reiterate, the problems the nones pose do not have to do with the future of religion in general, but with the future of the clergy. The key question posed by the nones does not have to do with the death of religion, but rather asks how religion will function without ministers. With this in mind, I would like to make a couple concluding remarks.

If the nones view themselves as experts, this necessitates that they recognize other members of the clergy as competing experts as well. To see oneself in terms of religious expertise requires that outside religious authorities be seen as experts *rather* than authorities. Because this study has been primarily focused on the nones, I could not adequately discuss the role of expertise within traditional religion. But it is worth questioning here, how many adherents of traditional religion also view their clergy in terms of expertise? And if congregants of these

religions view those in power as experts rather than authorities, what does that mean for religion? Questions such as these show how relevant questions of expertise are to our current religious landscape.

A final point I would like to make about expertise is the fact that its grounding in power makes it inherently weak. We have previously discussed the objectivity of power in terms of interest. If I want something, I am willing to bend my will or bend the will of others to get it. If we view human nature solely in these rational choice terms, then all of human agency is more or less objective. The only thing that the individual holds dear is the individual self and the interests this posits. This view always puts one under relations of power rather than authority because there is nothing that is subjective about my bending of will out of rational self-interest. But if we understand human nature in these very rigid terms, we realize that power, and consequently expertise, is actually very weak.

What if I am approached by my boss who tells me do this thing or I will be fired? The power relation between my boss and I warrants that I do what they say based on coercion and self-interest; I want to keep my job. But coercion lies on a spectrum much in the same way that all power does. What if, at the same time, I am told by a person with a gun that if I do the task laid out for me by my boss, they will kill me? If I operate solely in terms of self-interest, the power of my boss quickly becomes obsolete to me because I do not want to die. We see here an example of the inherent weakness of power. To use a common phrase, “there is always a bigger fish.” If I navigate life solely in terms of self-interest, solely in terms of means-ends, power will always be unstable. On this reading I have no beliefs and perform no actions based on moral values I deem authoritative, the only “authority” in my life is my own interests which are

constantly changing and evolving. If we were to view this in terms of expertise, we see a similar problem.

The “crisis of expertise” that Eyal talks about is largely brought on by the fact that experts are not viewed as authorities in the terms we have outlined here. Instead, they are viewed in terms of power. Because of this expertise is not stable; it can always be challenged. If I go to an expert and they give me bad news about climate change, for example, I can readily go to another expert who will give me an opinion that is more in line with my interests. If self-interest warrants who we turn to when we need expert guidance, we are left to our own devices to determine who to listen to within a sea of experts on different subjects. If we even want to listen to experts at all. In a hyper-individualistic culture, if it does not benefit my interests to listen to the experts, why should I? All of this contributes to the fact that expertise grounded in power relations, in interest calculus, is deeply unstable. I can always be coerced or persuaded to think differently, if I even want to listen to the experts at all. If expertise were based in authority, however, people would be more willing to listen when an expert scientist tells them they should be recycling. If I view science as authoritative, I am grounded in my subjective moral values about this subject and I believe its claims whole-heartedly. I do not have to be convinced or coerced; I am listening to the scientists when they speak.

This obviously has deep implications for the clergy. If the authority of clerical bodies is waning, for reasons having to do with science or secular culture, where else can they turn but relying on power in the form of expertise. If people will not heed the advice of priests solely by virtue of their positions, they must now argue their positions based on their knowledge and ability to perform a function. The bending of the will is no longer subjective and just but argued and rationalized. While I have not proved it here, I believe that many clerical bodies in the West

increasingly rely on expertise rather than their authority as a result of societies becoming secular. The invention and popularity of Christian apologetics is an excellent example of a religious body relying on expertise as opposed to authority. I want to be clear; I do not believe that religious bodies prefer to rely on expertise, or that all of them do, but I am not sure there are many other ways to empower themselves in secular societies.

While I outlined the sociology of religion's view of religious expertise, it is clear that problems arise when we view religion in these terms. We must remember that expertise, as a product of power relations, is inherently unstable. And I have shown previously how relations built on authority are firmer than those that rely on power. Where authority commands obedience, the powerful must coerce or persuade subjects to their will. Furthermore, unlike relations of authority, the power relation is something that is negotiable, and these negotiations typically have to do with self-interest. Indeed, I do not even have to listen to those in power if I empower myself. This trend continues into a discussion of religious experts as opposed to religious authorities.

Where religious authority typically acts as a barrier between clergy and lay, relations of power begin to break this barrier down. In the same way that authority and expertise are incongruous, we must remember that there is a difference between religious authorities and religious experts. These differences, like authority itself, are purely subjective. If I am operating under relations of authority, the priest can bend my will to his simply by virtue of his position and how I subjectively view this position. Moreover, it is not the knowledge or function of the priest in this case that separates them from the laity. It is solely the priest's position as an authoritative figure in a structure that the individual deems authoritative that keeps the sacred knowledge and functions of the priest safely out of the hands of the lay masses. But when



relations between priest and laity start to be seen in terms of power, these barriers that keep authority in the hands of the religious elite break down.

When priests are viewed as experts rather than authorities, their positions as mediators of the sacred becomes negotiable, like all other relations grounded in power. In fact, the sacred itself even becomes negotiable. The negotiability of the priest and the sacred gives the self-interested individual an immense amount of freedom while also making the authority structures of religions unstable and even rejectable. Understanding religion in terms of power relations, often grounded in self-interest, means that there is nothing grounding an individual to his or her religious tradition, no moral values that establish authority, aside from interest relationships. This means that religion becomes a means-ends relationship based in power, and whichever religion achieves my most desired ends, whichever expert performs their function the best, is the one I will choose. To use Christian examples, if the Episcopalians are more effective at achieving salvation, I will go to them for this. If the Assemblies of God are more effective at mediating the divine, I will go to them for that. Thus, people move from institution to institution to determine which one mediates the divine in the most appealing way, and phrases like “church shopping” are born.

In the same way that experts in modern times are doubted, shirked off, and rejected by individuals acting out of self-interest, religious expertise is in a similar situation. Unlike a religious authority, one does not have to listen to certain religious experts if other religions exhibit experts who perform their function more effectively. This is based on the fact that the expert, in their most basic form, is a functional agent who achieves ends through certain means. When another expert can achieve these ends in a way that the individual prefers, relations of power mandate that the individual go to that new expert. But this is not solely restricted to

experts within institutions. Indeed, if one is acting out of self-interest and believes that they themselves can perform the function of the experts, and perform this more effectively, they too are bound by relations of power to follow self-interest and act as an expert for themselves. We see this in the secular sphere in many ways. The rejection of medical experts and the prominence of self-diagnosing with WebMD is an example of this phenomenon. The rejection of climate scientists' warnings with a quick Google search that "proves" everything is fine is another. We also see this, however, in the religious sphere, the primary example of this being the nones, who see themselves as more effective mediators of the divine than the priests of institutional religions.

And as we have seen, the status of religious expertise is in such disarray at the moment that the nones can legitimately be seen as experts. While I did not argue this, I do believe that in modern times the clergy have had to occupy the space of experts rather than authorities because of their place in secular society. I also believe that much of the public now views clerical bodies in terms of their expertise. I believe the emergence and growth of the nones, in part, proves all of this to be true. And when authorities become experts, their power becomes unstable. With this in mind, perhaps religious expertise accounts for the rising number of the nones after all. The question I would now like to leave the reader with is whether this is good. Is it a positive thing that religious authorities be demoted to experts? Is the distribution of this religious expertise to the broader public something we should promote? And if this distribution is real, where does this leave the study of religion? What has the study of religion missed by wrongly equating experts with authorities? What can the study of religion gain by examining clerical bodies, and their relationships with the laity, in terms of expertise?

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ammerman, Nancy. *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Arendt, Hannah. *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin Books, 1954.
- Berger, Peter. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York: Anchor Books, 1967.
- Bryman, Alan. "Professionalism and the Clergy: A Research Note." *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 3 (Mar. 1985): 253-60.
- Burge, Ryan. *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021.
- Bush, Stephen S. *Visions of Religion: Experience, Meaning, and Power*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Campbell, Heidi A., and Paul Emerson Teusner. "Religious Authority in the Age of the Internet." In *Virtual Lives: Christian Reflection*, 59-68. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011.
- Casanova, Jose. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Chaves, Mark. "Secularization as Declining Religious Authority." *Social Forces* 72, no. 3 (Mar. 1994): 749-774.
- Collins, H. M., and Robert Evans. *Rethinking Expertise*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Dobbelaere, Karel. "The Meaning and Scope of Secularization." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, edited by Peter B. Clarke, 599-615. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Drescher, Elizabeth. *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Translated by Karen E. Fields. New York: Free Press, 1995.

- Epstein, Steven. "The Construction of Lay Expertise: AIDS Activism and the Forging of Credibility in the Reform of Clinical Trials." *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 20, no. 4 (Autumn 1995): 408-437.
- Eyal, Gil. "For a Sociology of Expertise: The Social Origins of the Autism Epidemic." *American Journal of Sociology* 118, no. 4 (January 2013): 863-907.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Crisis of Expertise*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019.
- Forrester, John. "Foucault, Power-Knowledge and the Individual." *Psychoanalysis & History* 19, no. 2 (August 2017): 215-231.
- Foucault, Michel. "The Subject and Power." *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4, (1982): 777-795.
- Freidson, Eliot. *Professional Powers: A Study of the Institutionalization of Formal Knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- Gannon, Thomas M. "Priest/Minister: Profession or Non-Profession?" *Review of Religious Research* 12, no. 2 (Winter 1971): 66-79.
- Gregory, Brad S. *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2012.
- Hall, Richard H. "Professionalization and Bureaucratization." *American Sociological Review* 33 (1968): 92-103.
- Hamilton, Malcolm. "Rational Choice Theory: A Critique." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, edited by Peter B. Clarke, 116-33. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Hatch, Nathan O. *The Democratization of American Christianity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.
- Heron, George. "'None': The Changing Religious Landscape in the United States." *Torch*, Fall 2015, 17-24.
- Hoffmann, John P. "Confidence in Religious Institutions and Secularization: Trends and Implications." *Review of Religious Research* 39, no. 4 (1998): 321-43.
- Hofstadter, Richard, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*. New York: Knopf, 1963.
- Hoge, Dean R. "The Sociology of the Clergy." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, edited by Peter B. Clarke, 581-96. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. New York: The Modern Library, 2002.

- Lettow, Susanne. "Turning the Turn: New Materialism, Historical Materialism and Critical Theory." *Thesis Eleven* 140, no. 1 (June 2017): 106-21.
- Lim, Chaeyoon, Carol Ann MacGregor, and Robert D. Putnam. "Secular and Liminal: Discovering Heterogeneity Among Religious Nones." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 4 (December 2010): 596–618.
- Lincoln, Bruce. *Authority: Construction and Corrosion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- McGuire, Meredith B. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Mercadante, Linda A. *Belief Without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Nisbet, Robert. *The Sociological Tradition*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993.
- Rieff, Philip. *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud*. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.
- Roof, Wade Clark. *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Root, Andrew. *Faith Formation in A Secular Age: Responding to the Church's Obsession with Youthfulness*. Ada: Baker Academic, 2017.
- Rouse, Joseph. "Power/Knowledge." In *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, edited by Gary Gutting, 92-114. Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Seligman, Adam B. *Modernity's Wager: Authority, the Self, and Transcendence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Smith, James K. A. *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014.
- Stark, Rodney and William Sims Bainbridge. *A Theory of Religion*. New York: P. Lang, 1987.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "What is Human Agency?" In *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I*, 15-44. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

- Teeuwen, Mark. "Japans Culture of Secrecy from a Comparative Perspective." In *The Culture of Secrecy in Japanese Religion*, edited by Bernard Scheid and Mark Teeuwen, 1-34. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Titon, Jeff Todd. *Powerhouse for God: Speech, Chant, and Song in an Appalachian Baptist Church*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988.
- Weber, Max. "Politics as a Vocation." In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited and translated by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, 77-128. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Social Psychology of the World Religions." In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited and translated by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, 267-301. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Sociology of Religion*. Translated by Ephraim Fischhoff. Boston: Beacon Press, 1991.
- Winch, Christopher. *Dimensions of Expertise: A Conceptual Exploration of Vocational Knowledge*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010.
- Woodhead, Linda. "Intensified Religious Pluralism and De-Differentiation: The British Example." *Society* 53, no. 1 (February 2016): 41-46.
- Wrong, Dennis. *Power: Its Forms, Bases, and Uses*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997.