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The Proliferation of African American NONES and the Effects of Secularism on African
American Culture

by

Willie Cartwright

Under the Direction of Monique Moultrie, Ph.D.

A Thesis submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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ABSTRACT

My research will explore the recent and explosive growth of those African Americans who identify as “NONES.” My research also examines whether or not identifying as a NONE is the first step to secularism for some African American NONES, and if so, what are the ramifications of a more secularized African American community. I posit that secularization (Secularization, an attitude or political ideology aiming to eradicate religion from public life as defined by the Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religions)¹ of the African-American community will affect every aspect of the community, including interpersonal relationships, how and where they allocate financial resources, education (embracing science), socialization, and other cultural issues.

My research on this topic is essential because an increasing number of African Americans identify as “NONES.” NONES, defined by the Pew Research Center, are individuals who respond to a survey asking to describe their religion; they choose atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular.”² African Americans make up the second-largest demographic of NONES at 34.9%,³. Relatively little scholarship has been done on this phenomenon.

The methodology used for this project will consist of an exhaustive and robust analysis of the available scholarship on this topic. My textual analysis will examine the work of those who have written about NONES as a collective and those individuals who have written about the specific life experiences of African American NONES. I will also examine the available

¹ *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religion*, “Religion,” Anne L. C. Runehov and Lluís Oviedo, ed. (Dordrecht, 2013).

² Pew Research Center, January 24, 2024. “Religious ‘Nones’ In America: Who They Are and What They Believe.” <https://pewrsr.ch/3SedVTm>.

³ Burge, Ryan. “Black Americas See the Biggest Shift Away from Faith.” *Christianity Today*, February 15, 2022. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/february/black-american-nones-faith-unaffiliation-nothing.html>.

scholarship on secularization as it applies to the African American community. My research will identify and fill the substantial gap in scholarship related to African American NONES. I will answer the questions of why there is a sudden growth in African American NONES, whether there is a causal relationship between an expanding African American NONE category and secularization of the African American community, and if so, what are the ramifications.

My research has multilayered implications. Its results are instrumental in reimagining how community financial resources can be more effectively used to better the community. My research can also be used to create updated political strategies for reaching African American NONES. Finally, my research can be used to track the changing cultural patterns of the African American community and how those changing patterns affect every aspect of African American and larger U.S. society.

INDEX WORDS: NONES, Atheist, Secularism, Religion, African American

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2024

The Proliferation of African American NONES and the Effects of Secularism on African
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by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the countless number of closeted African American free thinkers, nonbelievers, skeptics, agnostics, humanists, and atheists. I also dedicate this research to all of you who have or are thinking about embarking on a journey of religious and spiritual self-discovery. For those of you looking for a community of African American NONES, this project is evidence that we exist.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank Dr. Monique Moultrie for her unwavering guidance and support. Dr. Ashlyn Strozier for her support and encouragement, Dr. David Bell and Dr. Andrew Walker-Cornetta, Dr. Molly Bassett, Dr. Kali Cape, and Lauren Cooper for their encouragement. I want to acknowledge my cohort and peers who consistently challenged me in class and made me a better student and scholar. Finally, I would like to recognize my wife. She has been 100% supportive of this journey. I could not have done it without her. Thank you, Saleemah Cartwright.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Religious “NONES” are now a statistically significant “religious” group in the U.S. According to a January 24, 2024, Pew Research study, “NONES” make up 28% of the U.S. adult population. That is a larger cohort than Catholics or Evangelical Protestants.⁴ Demographically speaking, African Americans make up 13% of the overall U.S. population. However, 34% of African Americans identify as “NONES.”⁵ My research, in part, will focus on the general category of “NONES,” with the bulk of my research centered on the proliferation of African American “NONES,” their connection to secularism, and the subsequent effects African American “NONES” and secularism have on the African American community. There has been a sharp increase in the number of African Americans identifying as “NONES” from 2018 to the most recent data from 2022. A possible reason for this increase may lie in what questions are asked and how the questions are phrased on surveys or even the inclusion of persons whose prior surveys have coded as having a particular religion because nine-in-ten Black “NONES” surveyed believe in God or another supernatural higher power.⁶ Regardless of which study is used, it is clear that the number of African American “NONES” is on the rise, having grown from 19% to 34%.⁷

⁴ Pew Research Center, January 2024. “Religious ‘Nones’ in America: Who They Are and What They Believe.”

⁵ Ryan Burge. “Black Americas See the Biggest Shift Away from Faith.” *Christianity Today*, February 15, 2022. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/february/black-american-nones-faith-unaffiliation-nothing.html>.

⁶ Willie Cartwright, “Black Humanists vs. Black Atheists” (Paper written for Dr. Moultrie, Religion in the American South course, May 1, 2023), 2.

⁷ Ryan Burge. “Black Americas See the Biggest Shift Away from Faith.” *Christianity Today*, February 15, 2022. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/february/black-american-nones-faith-unaffiliation-nothing.html>.

I begin by defining key terms. For this project, secularization is the “transfer of persons, things, meanings, etc., from ecclesiastical or religious to civil or lay use.”⁸ “NONES” are defined by the Pew Research Center as individuals who, when answering public opinion surveys about their religion, select atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular.”⁹ The choice of “nothing in particular” was introduced in 2008 and consisted primarily of people who, before, would have identified with a specific denomination, i.e., Baptist, CME, Jehovah's Witness, etc. Many of these people still believe in a God or higher power. I am using the American Atheist organization's definition of atheism as a “lack of belief in gods.”¹⁰ The American Psychological Association defines Agnostic as “someone who does not believe it is possible to know for sure that a god exists.”¹¹ I chose to use this definition because it is the best fit for my research.

While the data has accumulated over the last few years, there has been little effort to understand African American “NONES” in academic approaches, the factors causing these rapid changes, and the phenomenological experience of being a NONE in the African American community. This project attempts a thicker description. My research will also address whether or not the African American community's cosmology on existence is becoming more secular. If so, what are the effects of secularization on the collective African American community? With this project, I hope to successfully fill in the gaps related to the African American community left

⁸ Jose Casanova. “Secularization,” In *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, (2nd Edition) ed. Neil J. Smelser, Paul B. Baltes, Elsevier, 2015, 383.

⁹ Pew Research Center, January 24, 2024. “Religious ‘Nones’ In America: Who They Are and What They Believe.” <https://pewrsr.ch/3SedVTm>.

¹⁰ American Atheist Association, “What is Atheism?” <https://www.atheists.org/activism/resources/about-atheism/>.

¹¹ Kirsten Weir, “What do you believe?” American Psychological Association *Monitor on Psychology*, July 1, 2020. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2020/07/believe#:~:text=Technically%2C%20an%20atheist%20is%20someone,sure%20that%20a%20god%20exists>.

open by researchers and historians who examine “NONES” and secularism. I posit that the expanding African American NONE community will naturally lead to more African Americans becoming secular. I posit that an expanding African American NONE community is related to the secularization of the community because as the NONE community grows, there will naturally be an increase in the number of African Americans who become atheist, agnostic, or view religion as irrelevant, thus creating a more secular community.

2 METHODOLOGY

The existing literature on my research topic is broad in the general sense but less expansive in the specifics. Stated differently, a significant amount of literature discusses the general topic of NONES. However, there is far less literature that specifically discusses African-American NONES and the effects of secularism on African-American culture. The literature I have selected for a textual analysis covers several topics related to my overall thesis. I begin with research that covers the subject of NONES in general, how the topic is defined, and who is included in the category. Next, I cover secularism and the transition of some “NONES” to secularism. I examine African American “NONES” and what makes their experience unique. What are the challenges faced by African American “NONES”? What can explain the gap in research related to African American “NONES” and their relationship to secularism? This section concludes with a discussion of what is next for African American “NONES.” Is secularism a viable option for the African American community?

This project aims to examine why there has been a sudden and rapid growth of the African American NONE group and whether or not African American NONES are more likely to

embrace a secular lifestyle. I hypothesize some potential effects of secularism on the collective African American community. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to determine whether there is a correlational or causational relationship, so instead, my thesis points to the gaps in the available research on this topic. In this burgeoning work, I conjecture how my research can fill these gaps and what the practical implications of such a study could be.

Because of the complexities and nuance of my research and the constraints outside my control, I felt a textual analysis would be appropriate. For this project, I analyze the written sources I have accumulated on this topic. Textual analysis involves examining a text's structure, content, and context to uncover its underlying meanings, themes, and patterns. This process typically involves identifying key ideas, analyzing the rhetorical strategies employed, and considering the cultural, historical, and social factors that may have influenced the text's creation.¹² My study will examine what has been written on the subject to date, how that information was gathered, and how it was analyzed. In particular, I use textual analysis to examine the growth of the NONE category, African American NONES, as a subcategory, the connection to secularism, and the effects of secularism on the African American community. A review of the scholarship on these categories demonstrates that the currently available research neglects to expound upon the growth of African American NONES and whether or not an expanded African American NONE group produces more African Americans who view life through a more secular cosmology.

¹² Chris Drew. "Textual Analysis: Definition Types and 10 Examples." September 17, 2023. <https://helpfulprofessor.com/textual-analysis/>.

2.1 NONES Defined

I begin my textual analysis with the book *NONES: Where They Came From, Who They Are, And Where They Are Going*.¹³ Political Scientist, statistician, and Baptist Pastor Ryan Burge presents some of the most recent data on who comprises the “NONES.” His book includes current information on the larger community of NONES. His research and writings are more quantitative and reflect his academic and professional training. Dr. Burge analyzed quantitative data he gathered from two primary sources: the General Social Survey 2018 report (GSS) and The Cooperative Election Study (CES). The CES research utilizes a more extensive sampling size of sixty-four thousand compared to the three thousand used by GSS. This quantitative data represents the most current information on the larger community of NONES.

Burge’s text also addresses how social scientists explain religious disaffiliation, including a wellspring of demographic information surrounding the disaffiliated. It examines the growth of NONES by presenting charts highlighting the varying socioeconomic descriptors like education, race, gender, income, and political affiliation. Burge also identifies the various groups within the NONE community, from people who have merely left organized religion but still believe in a God, deity, or higher power to those who identify as atheists. Burge’s merging of individuals who still profess a belief in a God with agnostics and atheists into the category of NONES is not without pushback from some scholars. Burge briefly examines African American NONES in this book, focusing on broader trends across all groups. However, the data descriptions offer a foundation from which I can bring the nuanced experience of African American NONES and the effects of secularism on the African American community in conversation with this overall trend.

¹³ Ryan P. Burge. *The NONES: Where They Came From, Who They Are and Where They Are Going*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 2021).

In particular, my thesis expands on Burge's work by examining the social economics of African Americans in greater detail.

While Burge's work is quantitative, theologian Elizabeth Drescher takes a more qualitative approach. In her book *Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones*, Drescher approaches the research of "NONES" from a different perspective. She explores the lived experiences of over 100 self-identified "NONES." We receive insight from "NONES" themselves on what it is like existing in a world steeped in religiosity. Contrary to what many may believe, most "NONES" are not non-believers; most were raised in religious households, and many have robust spiritual lives¹⁴ that intertwine with the lives of the religiously affiliated.¹⁵ This book explores the faith practices of all who fall into the NONE category, including agnostics, atheists, spiritualists, naturalists, humanists, and those who have created their spiritual practices by combining elements of more familiar faith practices.

Drescher describes how NONES engage and traverse their everyday lives. We learn how their relationship with family, friends, and nature is affected through reimagined spiritual practices. The author writes about the importance of mentors, teachers, and other resources in helping shape the new spiritual parameters of these "NONES." We learn if and how ethics and moral values are affected. The reader is privy to an expansive and personal look at how NONES operate and navigate their new spiritual prism. This book represents qualitative research that provides the details and depth to fully understand the implications of the quantitative analysis presented in the earlier book. The book does not give demographic information about the study

¹⁴ Elizabeth Drescher. *Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones*. (New York, New York: Oxford, 2016.)

participants. However, we know African American “NONES” represent a small amount of the overall NONE community; thus, we can safely assume that not many, if any, were included in this study. My research adds value to this field of research by focusing on underrepresented African Americans in the NONE community. African American “NONES” as a research group would benefit from a detailed study similar to what we see in Drescher’s work.

My analysis of the most up-to-date information is derived from recently published articles. One such article was a recent Pew Research study published on January 24, 2024, “Religious NONES In America: Who They Are and What They Believe Closer Look at How Atheists, Agnostics, and Those Who Describe Their Religion as Nothing in particular.”¹⁶ Pew Research Center conducted this analysis to provide a detailed portrait of religiously unaffiliated adults in the United States. Much of this profile comes from a Pew survey conducted on July 31 and August 6, 2023, among 11,201 respondents who are members of the Center’s American Trends Panel (ATP). The survey included interviews with 3,317 religious “nones”- 658 atheists, 678 agnostics, and 1,981 respondents who described their religion as “nothing in particular.” While the study does not break down participants by race, it does list the percentage of NONES by race. The ATP is an online survey panel recruited through national random sampling of residential addresses, which gives nearly all U.S. adults a chance to be selected. The survey is weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population in race, gender, ethnicity, political party, education, religious affiliation, and other categories. In addition to the July 31-Aug 6, 2023 survey, this analysis also draws on other ATP surveys conducted in recent years and the Center’s

¹⁶ Pew Research Center, January 24, 2024. “Religious ‘Nones’ in America: Who They Are and What They Believe.” <https://pewrsr.ch/3SedVTm>.

National Public Opinion Reference Surveys (NPORS). This Pew study differs from the earlier-mentioned study in providing more statistical and demographic data.

2.2 Secularism

Acknowledging the limited research data of African Americans in the earlier literary sources on Nones, I was excited to read and analyze the work of Joseph Blankholm. Blankholm is an assistant professor of Religious Studies at The University of California at Santa Barbara who writes extensively about secularism. In his book, *The Secular Paradox: On the Religiosity of the not Religious*, he focuses on specific behaviors of those within the NONE community who identify as secularists. Blankholm asks, “Why do those secularists who are the most adverse to religion engage in behavior that mimics religion?” Blankholm uses ethnographic research to examine the behavior of the most ardent secularists. He spends a significant amount of time at secular organizations interviewing their members. He consolidated all the qualitative and quantitative data he gathered over several years. Specifically, Blankholm used Pew Research studies that denoted religious affiliation or lack thereof to define and identify his research participants.¹⁷ He contacted leaders and activists who led the major nonbeliever organizations in the United States via his network. The leaders and activists introduced him to other activists. They invited him to their workshops and private meetings while devoting many hours to talking to him in interviews and over meals and drinks.¹⁸ Blankholm traveled with many of these leaders and activists nationwide to be with them in person, and he was a participant observer from June 2010 through November 2013 and again during the summers of 2016, 2017, and 2018. He observed dozens of lectures, conferences, private meetings, workshops, and social gatherings of

¹⁷ Joseph Blankholm, Joseph. *The Secular Paradox: On the Religiosity of the Not Religions* (New York: New York University Press, 2022, 7.)

¹⁸ Joseph Blankholm, *The Secular Paradox*, 12.

local and national nonbeliever organizations. He traveled to their headquarters and conferences in California, Louisiana, Ohio, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Washington DC, AND Wisconsin.¹⁹ He also analyzed hundreds of emails, blog posts, Facebook posts, and postings on online forums, newsletters, magazines, and postings to Google discussion groups.²⁰

From April 2012 through January 2013, he conducted sixty-five in-depth interviews with the leaders and members of these groups. From 2016 through 2018, he conducted thirty-seven more interviews and visited several field sites.²¹ The research for this book relied on more than a hundred interviews and dozens of site visits. He gained tremendous insight into the seemingly hypocritical behavior of some secularists. Blankholm's book does a better job than other scholars of being more inclusive in selecting study participants. His research participants include a variety of marginalized communities, including Muslims, Jews, women, Hispanics, and African Americans.

Dr. Blankholm focused his research almost entirely on nonbeliever organizations with a national presence. The largest groups include the Center for Inquiry (CFI), the American Humanist Association, the Secular Student Alliance, the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) American Atheist, the Secular Coalition for America, the Ethical Cultural movement, the Unitarian Universalist organization, Black Nonbelievers, Hispanic American Freethinkers, Foundation Beyond Belief, Secular, Woman, and Ex-Muslims of North America.²² Blankholm searched for his participants in "organized" nonbeliever groups for two fundamental reasons: first because he

¹⁹ Joseph Blankholm, 12.

²⁰ Joseph Blankholm, 12.

²¹ Joseph Blankholm, 13.

²² Joseph Blankholm, 14 .

thought they would be the most committed, and second because their organizations mimicked many religious organizations they were trying to escape.

Thus, Blankholm's book was not written as an in-depth study of the effects of secularism on the African American community. My thesis narrows to a focus on African Americans and their unique experiences of secularism—addressing issues centered around why African Americans are seemingly opposed to secularism. In particular, I conclude with how secular African Americans are viewed in their communities—the cultural and socioeconomic effects of the secularization of the African American community. However, I appreciate Blankholm for being more inclusive when researching and presenting his work.

Another formative text to analyze is *American Secularism: Cultural Contours of Nonreligious Belief Systems*.²³ Written by Joseph Baker and Buster Smith, it seeks to combine quantitative data and lived experiences from people who openly identify as secularists. This book examines secularism in the affirmative and not just from the standpoint of negating religion. The authors highlight how secularists make meaning of life outside of the constraints of organized religion. Social power, family formation, sexuality, politics, and more are examined from their experiences. Understanding African American secularism holistically adds value to the overall research topic.

I approach my research as an insider of the African American NONE community. Part of my theory asserts that the African American community is on an inevitable collision course with secularism. As a self-proclaimed NONE and secularist, this inevitable destination is one I welcome and believe will yield more positives than negatives. However, my textual analysis

²³ Joseph O. Baker and Buster G. Smith. *American Secularism: Cultural Contours of Nonreligious Belief Systems* (New York: New York University Press, 2015.)

seeks to present a balanced view of secularism. Professor of Religion Dr. Jonathon Kahn and theologian Dr. Vincent Lloyd examine secularism from a viewpoint unfavorable to African American “NONES” and secularists in their book *Race and Secularism in America*. Their work combines race and secularism to give an inside view of how the secular community has subjugated marginalized people. We see that the secular community mirrors other parts of American society in its behavior toward race relations and the treatment of African Americans. The authors focus on the fundamental whiteness of secularism in the United States. We learned how the white power structure in the secular community manages race and religion to the detriment of African Americans.

It is vital for my research that I do not present secularism as a panacea for all the ills of the African American community. Neither do I want to give secularism as a perfect replacement for religion in the African American community but as a plausible and inevitable alternative for some. Unfortunately, race and racism are intertwined within the African American community. Any discussion related to how African Americans experience life in this country has to include the acknowledgment and inclusion of race/racism. Most of the research to date on secularism is largely void of the fullness of the African American experience. My research aims to fill this void while offering a small measure of caution for African American NONES who eventually transition into secularism. Much like the religion they left, the secularist community may be rife with discrimination and racism. Secularism is not synonymous with racial and ethnic acceptance. Much like every other part of our society, African-American secularists will have to fight for acceptance and their place at the proverbial table. *Race and Secularism in America* pulls back the veil and remove the rose-colored glasses some African American NONES and secularists may have.

2.3 African American NONES

I theorize that one reason scholarship focused on “NONES” and secularism is void mainly of data about African Americans and their experiences is because according to 2021 Pew Center data African Americans are more religious (via measures of religious commitment) than the general population and even those religiously unaffiliated are more religious than other unaffiliated adults in the US.²⁴ This generally accepted belief that almost all African Americans are religiously devout can result in nonreligious Africans Americans being understudied. This is problematic because according the same 2021 Pew Research study, 18% of all African American adults identify as “NONES” and this number is increasing with every generation evidenced by the 28% of Black Gen Zers and 33% of Black Millennials who now are “NONES.”²⁵

Historically, African American “NONES” have been relatively small in numbers; however, they have not been nonexistent. Professor Christopher Cameron’s *Black Freethinkers: A History of African American Secularism* invites learning about the history of African American Black Freethinkers. Black Freethinkers are the precursor to Black/African American NONES. Cameron examines the history of African Americans who challenge the normative belief system of most African Americans. Black Freethinkers provide the reader with a comprehensive view of religious free thought in the African American community. Beginning with the Civil War era and Frederick Douglass and continuing through the Civil Rights Movement, the author gives us insight into the lives of well-known and influential African American figures who challenged the status quo of African American religious practice. Much like today’s “NONES,” black freethinkers incorporated individuals like Frederick Douglass, who identified as Christian but

²⁴ Pew Research Center, February 16, 2021. “Faith Among Black Americans.”
<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/02/16/faith-among-black-americans/>.

²⁵ Ibid.

challenged the belief system as well as those who completely denounced organized religion. Cameron provides historical information supporting foundational elements of my research, namely the long history of African American “NONES.”

In some situations, the information is based on archival records, historical writings, and contemporary work done by others in the field. Cameron relied on many of these sources in the completion of his book. He relied on historical manuscripts from the 1800 and 1900s books such as *The Religious Instruction of The Negroes*, by Charles Colcock Jones, *Slavery*, by Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing, *The Burden of Black Religion* authored by Curtis Evans, and historical writings by Frederick Douglas.²⁶ Cameron also relied on the historical work of writers from the 1900s, such as Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, and Langston Hughes. He gleaned information from the work of iconic figures of the Harlem Renaissance.

Cameron also gathered information from congressional records, such as the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, regarding the atheist and communist themes in poems from Langston Hughes, which took place in 1953.²⁷ Dr. Cameron examined information from freethought organizations and publications from as far back as World War 1. He looked at writings from Socialist and Communist party members because they were primarily associated with the “Freethought” movement. The speeches and books from progressive civil rights and Black Power movement activists were also used. In summary, Cameron’s methodology examined as much pertinent information as possible. His search included historical books, speeches, manuscripts, and transcripts from congressional hearings and the work of

²⁶ Christopher Cameron. *Black Freethinkers: The History of African American Secularism* (Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 2019.)

²⁷ Christopher Cameron, *Black Freethinkers*, xi.

contemporaries currently working in the field. Cameron collected his information from repositories including Emory University Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Book Library (Atlanta, Georgia), The Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library (New Haven, Connecticut), Egbert Ethelred Brown Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (New, York, New York), Alaine Locke Papers (Washington, D.C.), The Black Panthers papers (Amsterdam et al.), countless newspapers and periodicals books, journals and other published sources. The archives are essential because they provide evidence of a long legacy of African American Freethinkers, the precursor to African American “NONES.” Cameron uses the texts as proof of a historical precedent for Black secularists.

My research places value on understanding how African Americans have historically practiced faith and how younger (40 and under) African Americans differ from their parents and grandparents in how they practice faith. According to Pew Research Center data that emphasized the role of Black churches in the faith life of African Americans, the number of young Black people who attend places of worship has decreased. In contrast, the number of young people black people who identify as “NONES” has increased.²⁸ This information supports my thesis and overall research concerning the increase in African American “NONES.” The Faith among Black Americans Pew Research Center 2021 study explains the historical role of places of worship and their importance to the black community.²⁹ I look to use the article and extrapolate the data for my research. I look to expound on the study’s significance of places of worship to the community and what will happen when those places no longer serve in that pivotal role. I

²⁸ Pew Research Center, February 16, 2021. “Faith Among Black Americans.” <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/02/16/faith-among-black-americans/>.

²⁹ Ibid.

also look to address economic and social issues that will become relevant as the African American community becomes more secularized.

A 2021 article from Kiana Cox, titled, *Nine-in-ten Black “NONES” believe in God, but Fewer pray or attend Services*, corroborates some of the information in my research regarding the specific breakdown of African American “NONES.” Nine out of ten African American “NONES” still believe in God or a higher power.³⁰ The article also discusses the increase in African Americans who identify as “NONES (pulling its data from ATP and NPORS).” 18% of African American adults identify as NONES.³¹ The article's author highlights Pew studies detailing how African American NONE community members identify themselves. The studies separate those identifying as agnostic, atheists, and nothing in particular within the data. This is important for my research because it helps explain the nuances of the African American NONE community. These nuances are another reason the topic of African American “NONES” and secularism in the African American community is a viable research topic that needs further exploration. I posit that these nuances are expressed differently within African American NONES than they are within other ethnic groups. These complexities in how African American NONES see and label themselves are also part of the reason why the spread of secularism within the community has been slower and more deliberate than it has in other ethnic communities.

2.4 Challenges to African American Secularism

Black theologian Dr. James Cone discusses two of the most significant symbols of religion for Black Americans in his book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. In this iconic

30 Kiana Cox. “Nine-in-ten Black “NONES” believe in God, but fewer pray or attend services.” Pew Research Center. March 17, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/03/17/nine-in-ten-black-nones-believe-in-god-but-fewer-pray-or-attend-services/>.

31 Ibid.

writing, Cone explores these symbols and their interconnection in the history and souls of Black folks.³² He explores why many African Americans feel strongly connected to Jesus. He posits that the connection is based on shared suffrage. The Cross symbolizes Jesus' suffrage, and the Lynching tree represents the suffrage of African Americans. This work establishes a plausible explanation for the devoutness of African Americans to Christianity. Understanding this rationale helps us understand why embracing "NONES" and secularism in the African American community has been and continues to be complicated. This work also allows us to understand why African Americans have lagged behind other groups in their willingness to identify as "NONES" as well as accept secularism in the African American community. Pew Research Center data evidences that African Americans are among the most devout demographic in this country. Historians and others who study this phenomenon understand that because of the complex history African Americans have with this country, slavery, and Christianity, this devoutness is unique to African Americans. Cone sheds light on a possible reason for that relationship while simultaneously providing a reason why a movement away from Christianity to a more secular existence for African Americans may take longer than it has in other communities. My research will present the dichotomy between how younger and older African Americans view religion.

There are many other challenges facing African American "NONES" and those who hope to see the acceptance of nonbelief embraced by the African American community. One other major challenge is how the African American collective perceives non-belief. Researchers have studied whether or not Black Atheists are perceived as being "less Black" by others in the

³² James H. Cone. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013.)

community. Some of these findings were presented in an article titled “*You Don’t Believe in God? You Ain’t Black*”: *How identifying as Atheist Elicits Identity denial from ingroup members*.³³ From the article, we learn that some African Americans associate atheism and nonbelief in a higher power with “being white.”

The previously mentioned article provides more data and information supporting my theory that the African American community has been slower to accept nonbelief and nonbelievers. However, the article proves that this topic requires further study and exploration. The growth of African American NONES and the spread of secularism is inevitable in the African American community. This article presents the most substantial mental obstacles the community must conquer if the unavoidable transition will be inclusive and welcoming. For a community that has been historically marginalized and subjugated, we do not want to engage in self-subjugation because some in our community decide to practice religion differently than the majority or choose not to practice religion at all. In the next chapter, I address the subjective and objective fears that cause great consternation for African Americans accepting secularism. Objectively, issues around how financial resources are no longer directed to places of worship will be redistributed to the community. Other issues are where the community’s new leaders will come from since traditionally those individuals have come from the faith community. How will politicians get their messages on policy out to the community if places of worship no longer serve as the community’s gathering place? How will a more secular community affect the morals of those in the community? If at all? Will a more secular existence affect the spending habits of African Americans? Is the secularization of African Americans representative of the larger

³³ Howard, S., Kennedy, K.C., Vine, K.T. “You don’t believe in God? You ain’t Black”: Identifying as atheist elicits identity denial from Black ingroup members. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 29 (2): 2023.

American society? Answering these questions necessitates the importance of my research to the larger body of research on “NONES” and secularism.

2.5 The Future of African American Secularism

Black theologian Dr. Anthony Pinn is one of the few academy members who presents an alternative to organized religion for African Americans. Pinn posits Humanism as a plausible replacement for traditional religious practices in the African American community. He argues that Humanism’s focus on individual and community accountability correlates well with the natural tendencies of the African American community.³⁴ I am not sure how African Americans collectively view humanism; do many in the community equate humanism to secularism? My guess would be yes, especially those African Americans over the age of 50, but I do not have research data to answer that question adequately. I read Pinn’s theory on humanism for African Americans as more of a natural positioning than that of an objective alternative to organized religion. Nonetheless, his book on the subject is relevant to my research because it allows me to begin answering the question, “What is next?” After presenting data that point to an expanding African American NONE community, we discussed the relationship between the NONE community and the spread of secularism. My research addresses the obstacles facing the “inevitable” spread of secularism and why the African American community must address these obstacles. Finally, with Pinn’s book, I address what is next. What replaces traditional religious practices? Is finding a replacement necessary? Without conventional religious practices, what are we missing as a community? Is Humanism a valid replacement option? Do plausible alternatives already exist in the community? Pinn’s book catalyzes answering these questions.

³⁴ Anthony Pinn, *The End of God-Talk*. (New York: Oxford, 2013).

3 FINDINGS/ANALYSIS SECTION

The overall aim of this project is to focus on the expanding category of African American NONES. Is there a causal connection between the expanding NONE category and the secularization of the African American community, and if so, what are the ramifications? This section will focus on the results and findings of this research to date.

The first question is whether there is an expanding African American NONE category. According to the research, the answer is a resounding yes. In the next section of this paper, I present a chart cited by Dr. Ryan Burge, a political scientist and statistician. The chart shows an increase in the number of African Americans identifying as NONES, rising from 19% to 34.9% from 2008 to 2018.

The research also indicates a difference between those NONES who identify as “nothing in particular” and those who identify as agnostics or atheists. Those identifying as agnostic or atheist still represent roughly 3% of African American NONES. According to Kiana Cox’s article, *“Nine-in-ten Black ‘NONES’ Believe in God, but fewer pray or attend services”* published by Pew Research Center, “the share of Black Americans who do not identify with any religion is increasing; however, the vast majority of black NONES believe in God.”³⁵ We also learned from the research that those identifying as “nothing in particular” prior to the creation of this category (nothing in particular) in 2008 (roughly) these individuals identified with one of the traditional religious communities.

³⁵ Kiana Cox. “Nine-in-ten Black ‘NONES’ believe in God, but fewer pray or attend services.” Pew Research Center. March 17, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/03/17/nine-in-ten-black-nones-believe-in-god-but-fewer-pray-or-attend-services/>.

The next question we answered is, who are NONES? We find the answer to that question in Dr. Joseph Blankholm's work in *The Secular Paradox*. Blankholm gives us specific identifiers of people who now identify as NONES. He tells us that NONES is a broad category that includes Humanistic Jews, Hispanic Nonbelievers, African Americans, and Secular Muslims.³⁶ Simply put, we know NONES can come from any walk of life; they represent all nationalities and ethnic groups as long as they answer agnostic, atheist, or "nothing in particular" to a survey about their religious identity. I also discovered nuances to how NONE is defined, depending on the scholar. I have tried to be consistent in this paper while also trying to understand my readers' reference points. An example of this is understanding that most African Americans are not familiar with the term NONE. I understand that the term NONE is an academic term that is not often used outside of academia. This nuance makes it essential for me or any other scholar to be conscious of how the questions of one's religious identity are framed when asking most African Americans to respond.

Another of my findings dealt with the aversion many African Americans have to the terms agnostic and atheist. As mentioned before, although the collective category of African American NONES has increased, the percentage of those African American NONES who openly identify as agnostic or atheist has not increased. We find reasons for this in the article "*You don't believe in God? You ain't Black*". The authors of the article make the following conclusion: "Black atheists experience general anti-atheist bias (e.g., perceived as untrustworthy), as well as unique anti-atheist bias in the form of racial identity denial. These findings extend previous research on identity denial and intragroup dynamics and advance our understanding of the relationship between

³⁶ Joseph Blankholm, *The Secular Paradox*.

religious identification and racial identity denial within the Black community.”³⁷ For many in the African American community, believing in God or a higher power is synonymous with “being black.” Therefore, not believing in God or a higher power is antithetical to “being black.” This phenomenon of African American aversion to being labeled as agnostic or atheist might be the reason we have not seen the percentage of African Americans who openly identify as agnostic or atheist increase.

I conclude my findings with what the research suggests about the irrelevancy of religion for African American Nones. During my research, it became apparent that some African Americans who maintained a belief in God or a higher power also viewed religion as irrelevant in their lives. I define “religious Irrelvance” as “any form of religious identity that has minimal implicit impact on daily living and explicit identity is likewise not impactful.”³⁸ This definition is cited from research conducted by Dr. David Bell at Georgia State University. My findings suggest religious irrelevancy may be an essential identifier that needs further exploration by myself and others who write and teach about African American NONES. These findings left me wondering if my focus for future research should be more on religion becoming irrelevant for African American NONES.

To recap my findings, The research answered whether or not the category of African American NONES is expanding. The research also identified who makes up the category of NONES. I was able to distinguish agnostics and atheists from those who identify as “nothing in

³⁷ Howard, S., Kennedy, K.C., Vine, K.T. “You don’t believe in God? You ain’t Black”: Identifying as atheist elicits identity denial from Black ingroup members. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 29 (2) (2023): 202.

³⁸ David Bell and Willie Cartwright. “Black ‘NONES’ Reframing Quantitative Measures of Secularism Through the Lenses of Black Identity and the Black Church,” Paper presented at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Denver, CO: November 2023.

particular” as well as identify those in the “nothing in particular” group. The research provided us answers to why most African Americans have an aversion to the words agnostic and atheist; in doing so, I may have pinpointed the reason why, despite increasing numbers of African Americans identifying as NONES, there has not been an increase in the number of African Americans identifying as agnostics or atheist. Finally, through the research, I uncovered the issue of religious irrelevancy and why it may be the foundation research topic in this space moving forward. These findings represent a small sample size of why more research and scholarship is needed on this subject. My research will add to the work focusing on the African American NONE community.

4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

My analysis centers on the significance of my research. I will answer why my research is significant by examining several areas of importance within the African American community as they relate to my work. This section will address concerns related to inclusiveness, political, financial, social, leadership, and societal impact.

Inclusiveness

When mentioning inclusiveness, I am not speaking to the recent DEI movement that has permeated almost every area of our culture. I am talking about the importance of inclusiveness in scholarly research. Academic scholarship strives for accuracy and objectivity. Therefore, all academic research should adequately represent all subject matter material to the research topic. While doing research for this project, there was a noticeable absence of scholarly material focusing primarily on African American NONES and secularism in the African American community. In the most recent U.S. census conducted in 2020, people identifying as black or

African American made up 13.6% of the 334,919,865 million people in this country.³⁹ That is a significant amount of the total population. Not only are African Americans a substantial portion of the overall population, but as illustrated by the graph below, African Americans now represent a significant portion of “NONES.” In my research, I discovered a lack of African American representation in the scholarship on this subject. Dr. Blankholm, in his book *“The Secular Paradox,”* addresses explicitly African American “NONES” and African American secularists. However, his mention is only cursory, certainly not to the extent warranted, given the numbers mentioned in the graph below. Dr. Vincent Lloyd and Dr. Ryan Burge also give cursory mentions to African American NONES and secularists in their respective books on the subject. A relatively small number of African American scholars' work engages this phenomenon of African American NONES. Scholars like Dr. Christopher Cameron, Dr. Anthony Pinn, Candace Gorham, and Dr. Sikivu Hutchinson come to mind. My work aims to expand on the work already done by these scholars. My work is significant in this area because I seek to focus entirely on the lived experiences of African American “NONES” and secularists. My work will examine the phenomenon of African American NONES more comprehensively. My work will add to the minority of academy members who write about this topic. I add value because of my positioning as an insider who was once an outsider. I add a unique perspective that is not always possible for those who have never lived the experiences and navigated through life as an African American “NONE.” A singular unrestrained focus on this topic is part of my value proposition to the academy with this research.

³⁹ United States Census Bureau Quick Facts, Race and Hispanic Origin, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/RHI225222#RHI225222>.

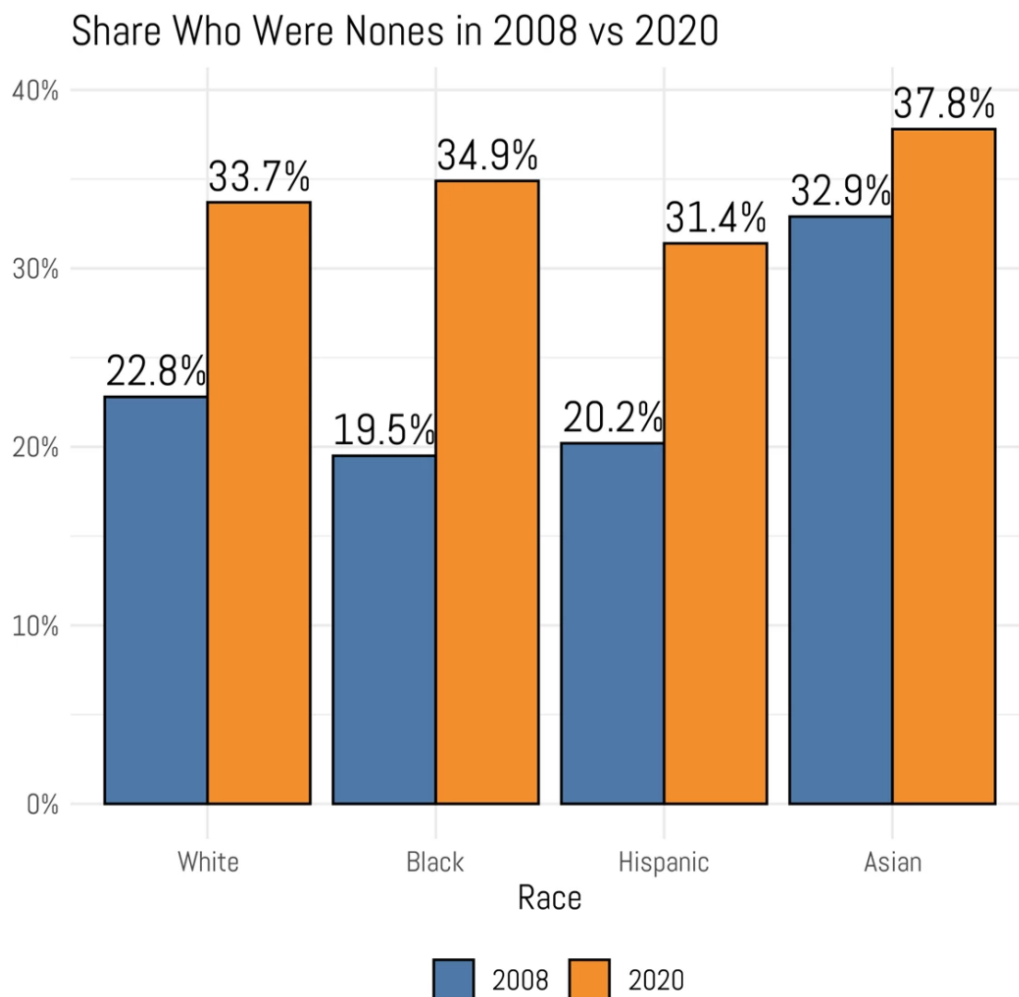


Figure 1. “Black NONES”: Reframing Quantitative Measures of Secularism through the Lenses of Black Identity and the Black Church, a graph showing the growth of African American NONES⁴⁰.

The chart shows an unparalleled increase in African American NONES from 2008 to 2020. The growth places African American NONES representation above every other ethnic group except Asians. It is a remarkable occurrence when you consider the historical devoutness African Americans have shown to organized religion.

⁴⁰ (Burge 2022).

Political

Another significance of my research is addressing the political future of African Americans as the community moves away from places of worship as the center of community life. Historically, many African American political leaders have emerged from the faith community. One of the earliest is Frederick Douglass. Some well-known contemporary political leaders who arose from the faith community are Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rev. Al Sharpton, Rev. Jesse Jackson, John Lewis, Ralph Abernathy, Dr. Rev. William Barber, and many others. In recent years, some African American political and social leaders have not come from traditional places of worship. The founders and leaders of the Black Lives Movement would be one recent example. The movement's founders are Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi. Neither fit the prototypical African American political leader with a traditional clergy background. My research addresses the ramifications for the African American community in cultivating political and social leaders who are void of a traditional religious background. Will our collective devoutness to the democratic party be challenged? Will issues related to social justice, LGBTQ+, and the environment start to receive higher priority? Politicians have always been able to use places of worship to speak to the community in mass. What happens when many in the community no longer physically attend places of worship, especially those 40 and younger? How does that change and influence political strategy? My research can help identify these issues and provide data to formulate an effective strategy. My research will also examine what new political outreach strategies are necessary, given that the faith community and their leaders will no longer hold the same influence they once did. My research is significant because it will address these issues, which, according to available data, have not been addressed substantially in the past.

Financial

From pastors buying \$65 million jets to debates about how to tithe adequately, money and finance has been a highly discussed topic in the black faith community. According to a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel article published July 1, 2009, LiveSteez research indicated that black houses of worship collected more than \$420 Billion in tithes and donations from 1980 to 2009. Another source, Tyler Media Services, estimated that black houses of worship revenue was about \$17 billion in 2006, over \$1 billion a month collected by black houses of worship. What happens to those financial resources when people stop physically attending? What percentage of those people “attending” services online send donations? What about those who no longer attend at all? How are those resources redirected? My research aims to answer these questions as well as other related questions. Data from my research on this topic can be used in a way that helps the community. Can those resources be redirected to homeless shelters, career training centers, private schools, grocery stores, daycare centers, recreation centers, parks, and other entities that can help members of the community from which the money is derived? What about establishing a community credit union or bank and lending money at low interest rates to those individuals with entrepreneurial aspirations? On a larger scale, data from my research can be used by marketing firms to help better understand the available spending power in the community and how to better appeal to potential buyers. My research represents a reimaging of what can be done with the financial resources siphoned out of the neighborhood under the guises of religion. I imagine my research being used to examine why the prosperity gospel appeals to a particular segment of our community. Suppose we understand the historical relationship between the places of worship and community finances. In that case, the significance of my research and its concentrated focus on the African American community is significant. The financial issues I have

addressed are a small sampling of the relevant problems that affect the African American community and our larger society.

Social/Cultural

What is the social/cultural significance of my research? Understanding how our collective religious cosmology influences African American social culture is essential to answering this question. The collective black faith community and our interpretation of the biblical text have shaped everything from our music to our dress. The belief in God culturally is shared across circumstances. However, what happens when the community's point of reference is no longer from religion? What changes? My research aims to answer those questions as well as why answering those questions is essential. One topic specific to this is whether or not there is a change in the collective morality of African Americans as the community shifts more toward a secular cosmology. If there is a shift, is the shift in the expanding NONE category causal or coincidental? How do we measure collective morality? Ironically, is our idea of morality driven by our religion or faith practice? These are additional concerns and questions my research will address. My research is also significant in that it will address other social and cultural concerns such as relationships; will African American women continue to select mates based on the criteria of that mate being “God-fearing”? Will they be more open to dating and marrying mates who are not religious? What about openly agnostic and atheist? The same for men. Another related issue is how many African Americans discipline their children. Many African Americans believe in “corporal punishment,” aka spanking or “whooping,” and many base their actions on their interpretation of biblical scriptures, specifically Proverbs 13:24: “He that spareth his rod hateth his son.” (Spare the rod, spoil the child” actually comes from a 17th-century poem called *Hudibras*).

Religion has undoubtedly influenced how African Americans view relationships, not only with significant others, family, and close friends but also with those from other cultures. Religion has influenced how many African Americans view their relationships with those of European descent. The unique history between African descendants, European descendants, and religion has undoubtedly been more beneficial for European descendants. Will a move by African Americans from a religious cosmology into more of a secular cosmology create a reciprocal balance in that relationship? Put another way, has religion and the way it has been interpreted and taught fueled a relationship imbalance between black and white people in this country that favors white people? If so, can an expanding African American NONE group and secularization of the community create a balance in that relationship? What my research can add is an examination of if and how religion influences African Americans to view white people and vice versa. I have not seen significant scholarship on the abovementioned topics in my research. My value to the academy will be adding considerable scholarship on these topics.

Leadership

Leadership in the African American community has traditionally been viewed through the prism of their faith. Local to national leaders have traditionally come from the faith community. The neighborhood pastor or deacon commanded respect and reverence in most black communities. The most effective and well-known African American leader, Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., was a product of the faith community. However, with the recent Black Lives Matter movement, the reliance on traditional clergy for leadership is starting to change. Coincidentally, some African American NONES cite the lack of leadership from religious leaders on social justice and cultural issues as one reason for their separation from organized religion and positioning as a NONE. My research will examine this issue and its ramifications. This area has

little scholarship to date, but it has significant implications. Cultural leadership affects almost every aspect of black life: politics, social issues, education, finances, mental health, physical health, governmental policy, and local and federal legislation are all influenced by leadership. My research will bring much-needed attention to this issue. I will answer whether the community's leadership is indeed steering away from leaders with a traditional religious background and, if so, what the real-world implications are. Will this change how the community approaches the concerns mentioned above? My contribution includes scholarship that brings attention to these issues and provides valuable data that can be applied to real-world situations.

Societal Impact

This section addresses the societal impact of my research on the collective U.S. The United States is a large, united culture comprised of smaller, individualized cultures. Because of this interconnectivity, the actions of each subculture affect our larger society. Thus, what happens in African American culture affects our larger society. Concerning the expansion of NONES and secularization of African American culture, we may be looking at the proverbial “canary in the coal mine.” Is this phenomenon in the black community an indication of what to expect from society? As I mentioned earlier in this paper, African Americans have been known as the most religious demographic in the United States. If their abandoning of organized religion is an upward trend, can we say the same for the collective country? My research will add value by exploring this question and the ramifications of results in the affirmative. All the issues I addressed earlier would apply to the larger U.S. society: the redirecting of financial resources away from places of worship, political strategies, political policy, governmental policy, international relations with allies like Israel as well as countries we have had tensions with based partly on religious differences can all be affected. Domestic policy that targets the LGBTQ+

community, taxation of places of worship, private religious schools and universities, and First Amendment rights would all be affected. Thus, the value and significance of my scholarship to the academy go beyond the interests of the African American community and would benefit our larger society as well.

5 CONCLUSION

This research was born out of personal conviction and my lived experience. It has mushroomed into a calling and advocacy work, representing those not fortunate to be in the position bestowed on me. While studying this topic as a student at Georgia State University, I became painfully aware of the lack of scholarship on the lived experiences of African American NONES. The general topic of NONES has started to gain traction in the academy, and we see more scholarship on the subject. However, most of that scholarship is still void of the experiences of African American NONES. My research aims to fill that void.

The significance of my research is that it benefits both the micro and macro collective society. It is essential to understand the unprecedented growth of African American NONES over the last few years and answer the question of whether or not a larger, more robust African American NONE community can contribute to its secularization and what the ramifications are. On a macro level, the ramifications will affect society at large. I discussed those ramifications throughout this project. Research on this topic should reflect and represent every demographic group. African Americans are 13% of the United States population and represent 34% of the NONE category. Even with these numbers, the African American NONE experience is lacking in current scholarship. Hopefully, my scholarship can add to the minority of voices speaking and writing on this topic with the hopes of bringing much-needed attention.

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