

RELIGIOUS NONES IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: WHAT DO WE KNOW AND  
WHAT WOULD WE LIKE TO KNOW?

HELGA DICKOW, NADIA BEIDER, AND YONATAN N. GEZ

ABI Working Paper No. 16

Freiburg, Germany  
January 2021



ABI Working Paper No. 16

Edited by the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute

The ABI Working Papers series serves to disseminate the research results of work in progress prior to publication in order to encourage the exchange of ideas and academic debate. An objective of the series is to get the findings out quickly even if the presentations are less than fully polished. Inclusion of a paper in the ABI Working Papers series does not constitute publication and should not limit publication in any other venue.

Copyright remains with the authors.

Copyright for this issue:

© Helga Dickow, Nadia Beider, Yonatan N. Gez

All ABI Working Papers are available online and free of charge on the website.

[www.arnold-bergstraesser.de/abi-working-papers](http://www.arnold-bergstraesser.de/abi-working-papers)

For any requests please contact:

[info.abi@abi.uni-freiburg.de](mailto:info.abi@abi.uni-freiburg.de)

The Arnold Bergstraesser Institute cannot be held responsible for errors or any consequences arising from the use of information contained in this Working Paper; the views and opinions expressed are solely those of the author or authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Institute.

Arnold Bergstraesser Institute  
Windausstraße 16  
79110 Freiburg  
Germany

## RELIGIOUS NONES IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: WHAT DO WE KNOW AND WHAT WOULD WE LIKE TO KNOW?

Helga Dickow, Nadia Beider, and Yonatan N. Gez

### Introduction

Since the early 2000s, scholars have been showing increasing interest in the category of ‘religious nones’. While antecedents date back to the 1960s and 70s, it was only in the new millennium that the subfield of nonreligious or secular studies emerged (Cragun, 2016). Despite misgivings about the application of a category defined using negation, scholars came to see nones as a free-standing category, with its own profile characteristics—socio-demographic, political, economic, and more—though these may vary greatly by region and depending on definitions. So far, however, interest in religious nones largely focused on the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. While these regions are also the usual suspects when it comes to overrepresentation in social studies in general, these regions have also been the ones in which, over recent decades, the rise of nones—and, by extension, the weakening of historical religious institutions—has been most dramatic (Inglehart, 2021). As Cragun (2016, p. 313) sums up, “While we now have a fairly clear understanding of the characteristics of the nonreligious and atheists in the U.S. and in many other developed countries in the West, very little is known about these two groups outside of these national contexts”—further emphasizing the need for more “research on nonreligion and atheism outside of the developed West”.

The above is especially true with regard to Sub-Saharan Africa. Probably the two best data sources on the topic are the Pew (2010b) and Afrobarometer (2018), both of which consider the proportion of unaffiliated individuals across the region as approximately 3.2%. In fact, as we will see throughout this paper, actual assessments can vary depending on definitions of nones—an idea demonstrated by a 2012 Gallup poll, which found 7% of Africans claiming they are “not a religious person” and 2% are “convinced atheists”. A lower assessment is offered by the World Christian Encyclopedia (Johnson & Zurlo, 2020), which estimates the total proportion of religious nones (defined as atheists) in sub-Saharan Africa as under 1%. It is unsurprising that, commenting on Afrobarometer data, Zuckerman and colleagues (Zuckerman et al., 2016, p. 49) note that the rates of the unaffiliated in Sub-Saharan Africa is “negligible”. While it certainly seems that Sub-Saharan Africa continues to be highly religious, we reject describing its population of nones as negligible. For one thing, considering the tremendous normative power of religion across the region, there is room to suspect that the data does not fully reflect the actual scope of African unaffiliated, who may be hidden behind a curtain of stigmas and cultural misconceptions. Furthermore, even if the Pew and Afrobarometer assessments are correct and the percentage is approximately 3%, in a population of over 1.2 billion, this can amount to some 40 million individuals who deserve scholarly attention. Lastly, even if the region as a whole may have a relatively low rate of nones, this is far from homogeneous. Some regions, such as with the predominantly Muslim northern Africa and the Sahel region, have a particularly low rate of religious non-affiliation, while the predominantly Christian southern part of the continent contains substantially higher averages.

We propose that the marginalization of the topic of African nones has been fuelling a vicious cycle of invisibility. This also influenced scholarly attention, as scholars have been avoiding engaging with a topic that seems so marginal. As Yirenkyi and Takyi (2010, pp. 74-75), writing on Ghana, note, “despite the fact that some Ghanaians self-report as unaffiliated with any religious persuasion in the country, it is unfortunate that we know very little about this group of Ghanaians. [...] a review of the existing literature on religion suggests that very little has been written about this population and it has been virtually ignored in the discourse of religions in Africa.” Recognizing the limitations of existing research, in this paper we take a first step towards addressing this under-researched topic and to distinguish what we can

ascertain from myths and popular images. We do so cautiously, mindful of the limitations of available data points. Consequently, at times we may appear to offer more questions than answers. After a general presentation of the state of research on religious nones from a general—mainly Western—perspective, we turn to present three challenges and three open questions, engagement with which can help to advance research on Sub-Saharan nones.

In light of the wide geographical scope of the region discussed, our data in this paper primarily draws on available statistical material, including a range of surveys by the Pew and multiple Afrobarometer survey rounds (2002-2018), as well as national censuses. Complementing this statistical data, we draw on our own first-hand, longstanding ethnographic studies on religion and society across three Sub-Saharan countries: South Africa, Kenya, and Chad.<sup>1</sup> We are aware that, even with such inclusion of concrete local voices, a paper of such a scope doubtlessly contains some generalizations. While we qualified our statements as much as possible, we believe that some generalizations are inevitable and even necessary for understanding general regional trends. In this respect, our focus on Sub-Saharan Africa as a single region is in line with standard classifications used by major surveys.<sup>2</sup>

### Religious Nones: A Global Perspective

Around the world, religious nones are said to be on the rise, especially in the West (Pew Research Center, 2012a, 2015a). According to data from the World Values Survey, the proportion of the global population identifying as religious nones doubled over the last forty years, while in Europe that population tripled, from 10.5% to 30.2%, over the same period (Balazka, 2020). In the USA, where religious identity is highly unstable (Beider, Forthcoming 2021), the proportion of nones increased at a more rapid pace, rising from about 15% to about 23% of the adult population in the span of only seven years, between 2007 and 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2012a, 2015a). While these figures are striking, it is not at all clear what to make of them. Before we look at Sub-Saharan Africa, let us first consider some of the main issues related to research on nones in general.

The gauging of religious nones is usually done using quantitative methods and drawing on self-identification. As Zurlo and Johnson (2016, p. 58) note, self-identification is regarded as a more accurate and respectful way of identifying people's religious identity.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, such sources are not without problems: through survey design and laying out of categories, researchers have substantial influence over the eventual results. As nones often maintain flexible self-definition—more on that later—it is especially notable how seemingly minor details such as the order of questions or their precise wording can influence data, throwing comparability into question. As Hackett (2014) notes, a simple change of wording from 'What is your religion, even if you are not currently practicing?' to the shorter 'What is your religion?' may yield significant differences in replies among people with ambivalent affiliations. Furthermore, scholars note a striking distinction between one-step and two-step questioning: as Zurlo and Johnson (2016) show, the rates of religious nones soar when, prior to asking the respondent's religion, the interviewee is asked whether they have a religion and

---

<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork was conducted intermittently in South Africa between 2006 and 2009, in Kenya between 2011 and 2014, and in Chad between 2015 and 2019. For the sake of convenience, we treat all ethnographic data as collected by all of us.

<sup>2</sup> North Africa is largely regarded as demographically distinct, and possibly as more closely in line with the Middle East than with Sub-Saharan Africa.

<sup>3</sup> At the same time, scholars should also cross these self-identifications with other available information. In particular, scholars advise that we should be aware of apparent tensions, for example by considering the case of those who claim to be non-religious yet factor high when it comes to practices identified as religious such as faith, prayer, or attendance of places of worship.

only those who do are followed up with request for specification. Moreover, as being a none is largely perceived as an undesirable attribute, questions should be checked for hints of negative judgement.

Before we delve deeper into these issues, however, let us ask who, exactly, are the religious nones? While drawn under religious affiliation, the category of none may appear at odds with the question, as it appears to be based on a negation—emphasis on what one is *not*—rather than affirmation—for example, of one’s identity as a secularist or humanist. Unsurprisingly, the term is used quite elastically and at times ambiguously, as an umbrella category that points to terminologies such as seculars, disaffiliated, atheists, agnostics, and “nothing in particular”. These distinctions matter, both because some terms are more comfortable for people than others (“nothing in particular” tends to be more easily embraced than “atheists”), and because, depending on definition, they offer different emphases. Thus, for example, Schwadel (2020) notes that atheists are more likely to be vehemently anti-religious, while those who maintain “nothing in particular” may actually be spiritual or even religious in their own way. In light of these internal tensions, does it even make sense to group such diverse groups together under the same title? Responding to a Pew study that grouped nones together with atheists, Zurlo and Johnson (2016, p. 60) note that, “from an operational, demographic perspective, putting individuals who believe in a higher power in the same category as those who adamantly deny the existence of a higher power is highly incongruous”.

Drawing on the last quote, a related point touches on the nature of nones’ relationship to organized religion. While they are unlikely to be active members of a religious institution, nones may certainly entertain spiritual dispositions, identifying as what Beyer (2015) calls ‘spiritual but not religious’. Indeed, while some nones are atheists, others manifest a subjective expression of spirituality as noted by the rise of personal religiosity especially in the West (Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2020). Thus, for example, the Pew’s (2012b) report “‘Nones’ on the Rise” explicitly suggests that, in the United States, about two thirds of those identified as nones believe in God, about a third consider themselves as spiritual but not religious, and a fifth pray daily. As Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme (2020, p. 71) note, most nones in the United States and Canada actually subscribe to the category of “believing without belonging”. While the vast majority of research on the topic is conducted in the global North, such conception of the none as a religiously distanced practitioner has also been noted in other contexts. For example, writing on Uruguay, Da Costa (2020) notes that unaffiliated people may have complicated relations with institutional religion, which they often perceive as restricting their search for wellness, resulting instead in personalized spiritualities. For Da Costa (2020, p. 4), “the category of the ‘non-affiliated’ includes those who express a belief in God and in transcendence, but without the mediation of any religious institution”. We should also recognize that, just as people might believe without participating, they may also participate without believing (Pew Research Center, 2009, 2010a). As Yirenkyi and Takyi (2010, pp. 75-76) note with regard to Ghana, some people who do not believe in God nonetheless see themselves as Christian—whether out of respect for social norms or for any other reason.

It thus emerges that the distinctions around the category of nones are more fluid than they may seem at first glance. For example, when the abovementioned “‘Nones’ on the Rise” survey (Pew Research Center, 2012b) asked the American respondents who identified their present religion as ‘nothing in particular’ whether they ‘think of themselves as Christians’, about a half replied positively (Hackett, 2014, p. 407). One possible framework for understanding such ambiguities is through the idea of membership liminality. This concept has been effectively argued for by Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam (2010) in a study that showed that almost a third of respondents who identify as religious nones over one year claim a religious

affiliation the successive year, and vice versa. The researchers further note that, despite this change in self-identification, most of these fluctuating respondents reported no significant change in religious belief or practice. The authors call these practitioners ‘liminal nones’, “as they stand halfway in and halfway out of a religious identity” (2010, p. 596).

### Three Challenges

#### First Challenge: Popular Conceptions

The centrality of religion is widely entrenched, if arguably overstated, in perceptions of African cultures. John Mbiti, the author of the influential statement whereby Africans are “notoriously religious”, made the case for religion’s paramount social role in African cultures. As he concluded bluntly, “African peoples do not know how to exist without religion” (Mbiti, 1969, p. 2). Historically, such narratives were associated with the resilience of traditional African religions, and may have something to do with an apologetic rejection of the denigration of traditional African religions by colonial agents. Writing on traditional African religions, Amadou Hampâté Bâ notes that, “religion in Africa does not consist only of respecting established dogmas that pay homage to a single or multiple gods. It is the very backbone of life. It shapes all human actions be they public or private; those who call themselves nonbelievers, if they lived in Africa, would see their convictions undercut” (Bâ, 1965, p. 8, our translation). Such ideas continue to resonate today, and African cultures—diverse though they are—continue to be widely associated with high levels of religiosity. While Africans’ association with religiosity is at times touched by stereotypical, even atavistic views of superstitiousness, other times Africa is lauded as a haven of religious resilience in an otherwise secularizing world, for example by those who present the region as the new hub for global Christianity (Jenkins, 2011). With regard to Islam as well, a 2017 prediction by the Pew proposed that, “sub-Saharan Africa will surpass the Middle East-North Africa as the region with the second-largest Muslim population in the next 20 years” (Pew Research Center, 2017a).

Various studies seem to support the idea whereby “Africa is today the least secular continent” (Kasselstrand, 2019, p. 631). This much has been shown, for example, in a 2012 WIN-Gallup International (2012) survey.<sup>4</sup> The Pew study (2010b) found that Africans tend to exhibit high levels of religious commitment. For example, nine out of ten Africans claim that religion is “very important” in their lives, 97.2% believe in God, 76.4% go to mosque or church regularly and 77.9% believe in the literal truth of scripture—be it the Bible or the Qur’an.

While Africans indeed tend to be relatively religious, we caution against overidentifying Africans with religiosity, and certainly with the doctrines promulgated by religious leaders. Directly and indirectly inspired by the ‘lived religion’ approach (Hall, 1997; McGuire, 2008), recent scholarship has shown how dynamic and mobile Africans’ religious identities may be, often overflowing formal institutional prescriptions and membership exclusivity (Gez et al., 2017). Explanations for such fluidity often emphasize a utilitarian stance in response to circumstances of lived hardship and the consequential pragmatic thirst for miracles of breakthrough (Daswani, 2015; Haynes, 2017). Such a stance draws attention, if only implicitly, to the fact that African conversions to Islam and especially Christianity are, by and large, a fairly recent phenomenon. Indeed, while religion is deeply embedded in African social identities, surveys illustrate that religion’s role in people’s self-perception may be

---

<sup>4</sup>The survey, it should be said, included only six African countries. Moreover, as Zuckerman and colleagues mention, “some of the WIN-Gallup International results are sufficiently at variance with other sources that they must be viewed with caution” Zuckerman, P., Galen, L. W., & Pasquale, F. L. (2016). *The Nonreligious: Understanding Secular People and Societies*. Oxford University Press. .

secondary to other identity aspects. Thus, for example, when asked about their self-identification, Rwandans placed religion second after nationality (Hanf & Dickow, 2009), Chadians placed it third after nationality and ethnicity (Dickow, 2005) and South Africans placed it fourth, after personality traits, positive characteristics, and ethnic or linguistic belonging (Dickow, 2012). As Gez and his colleagues (2020) have argued with regard to Kenya, everyday practices of religious mobility may be understood precisely along these lines, as a rejection of religious dogmatism and an affirmation of the supremacy of other identity aspects.

The flip side of the positive conception of African societies as religious is a widespread negative perception of non-religiosity as problematic or worse. It should be emphasized that social pressure associated with religious affiliation is not unique to African contexts. As Campbell (1971, p. 4) reminds us, in the United States in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, not to have a religious association would have amounted “to risk not only social ostracism, petty persecution and accusation of immorality but criminal proceedings as well”. Traces of such negativity continue to exist, and indeed even today in North America, many—especially of the older generations—remain uncomfortable with the category of religious nones (Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2020).<sup>5</sup> Such perceptions are stronger in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, where ideas about religious nones do not simply evoke discomfort at the sight of an oddity, but are perceived as a spiritual and moral failing. As a leading Kenyan Presbyterian pastor told us in a 2011 interview:

“Generally, one of the characteristics of an African is to believe in God [...] standing from the African point of view, coming from the understanding that you cannot not believe in God as an African; then you are a strange person, a really strange person who rejects the God of the Mountain, you know, if you are a Kikuyu for instance. [...] People cannot understand why, it is not an accepted, it is not a readily understood state, how do you arrive at that kind of non-religiosity. So that is a strangeness, people do not understand how you can, you know, either, because it seems not as an elevation but as a deterioration; how can you deteriorate to that level, whether from the religious angle or from the African angle, it is seen as a deterioration. And some also see it as a condition that needs exorcism.”

Such common negative perceptions, which expose oneself to ridicule and stigma, may well bias our understanding of the scope of the phenomenon. Writing on Ghana, Yirenkyi and Takyi (2010, pp. 74-75) note, “in a highly religious society such as Ghana, unaffiliated people may be stigmatized, hence may be less likely to be visible as Christians and their Muslim counterparts.” Indeed, in contexts where religiosity is seen as fundamentally normative, Joel Thiessen’s (2015, p. 97) observation that, “due to negative stigma associated with the term ‘atheist’ the actual atheist population could be slightly larger than survey figures suggest” may prove to be an understatement. It is hard to tell, however, just how much of an understatement it is. As the General Secretary of the South African Evangelical Alliance of South Africa told us in a 2006 interview, many South Africans are actually nones without admitting it: “77% of South Africans are Christians, but it’s mainly Christians who don’t go to church. People have a distant memory of churches, they’re unchurched. That is not right. If you ask them, they would call themselves Methodists or Reformed because it was the church of their parents or

---

<sup>5</sup> The Pew’s Religious Landscape Study shows that, in the United States, not only are younger people increasingly more likely to identify themselves as non-religious, but this higher propensity for self-identification is preserved when controlled for actual (reported) religious observance. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones/>; <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/14/the-factors-driving-the-growth-of-religious-nones-in-the-u-s/>.

grandparents.” To study religious nones in Sub-Saharan Africa, our first challenge is therefore to face up to preconceptions about ‘the religious continent’. Such preconceptions may bias a variety of stakeholders—African leaders and lay people, as well as scholars.

### Second Challenge: Structural Opposition

The second challenge for studying religious nones refers to structural resistance within African political systems, and the possibility that such repression may compromise data and taint our lenses. While most African countries have inherited, as a legacy of European colonization, a degree of separation between religion and state, authoritarian tendencies and the great power of religion in many post-independence African countries have often tested this principle. Indeed, the negative attitude towards nones is not only theoretical and the result of individual disposition, but is often enshrined in political practices both formal and informal. In many countries in the region, and above all Muslim-dominated ones, religious identity is a fundamental assumption. Indeed, rates of non-affiliation are strongly correlated with a country’s proportion of Muslims. Countries in which over 90% of the population identify as Muslim have the lowest percentages of religious nones, while the countries with the highest rates of non-affiliation (over 10%) all have Muslim populations of less than 3% (Afrobarometer, 2018). This is consistent with global patterns (Sevinç et al., 2018) and may be due to the difficulties associated with exiting Islam (Samuri & Quraishi, 2014). (Zuckerman et al., 2016, p. 47) This substantial difference between Muslim-dominated and Christian-dominated countries has complicated reasons, and is grounded in both legal codes and informal norms as we illustrate below.

On the formal-legal side, legislation on matters such as apostasy, blasphemy, along with legal hurdles set for setting up new—supposed deviant—religious and non-religious groups create a playing field in which exploring non-belief is systematically discouraged. Thus, some African countries actively curtail ‘religious exits’ through the application of apostasy and anti-blasphemy laws (Pew Research Center, 2016c). Such laws exist in all Muslim-dominated countries both south and north of the Sahara, except for former French colonies, which took over French *laïcité* on paper. As Roman Loimeier (2001) shows in relation to Senegal, tensions between Islam and *laïcité* may give rise to clerical resistance and to calls for reforms. The consequences are especially grim in countries where Sharia courts run parallel to the governmental justice system. For example, in Nigeria, where the constitution guarantees separation of religion and state, a dozen northern states with a predominantly Muslim population reintroduced a stricter version of Sharia in the early 2000s—a move that led to particularly harsh verdicts on matters of blasphemy (Deutsche Welle, 2020a, 2020b). In addition to blasphemy laws, formal apostasy laws, which on rare occasions could even result in the death penalty, can be found primarily in countries with a large Muslim population, like Morocco, Egypt, Western Sahara, Somalia, Mauritania, and Nigeria.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, such provisions are not unique to Muslim-dominated countries, and in various explicitly secular states like Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, South Africa, South Sudan, and Tanzania, blasphemy is punishable by fines and imprisonment for up to several years, where they supposedly set out to minimize social strife. Religious biases can also be found in Christian-dominated countries, albeit in an attenuated form. For example, in the 1990s under President Frederick J. T. Chiluba, once-secular Zambia was baptised a Christian nation, even going as far as amending the preamble to the constitution to that effect (Phiri, 2003)—a pro-religious line that continues under current President Edgar Lungu. Thus, for example, publications that are deemed

---

<sup>6</sup> Sudan abolished apostasy in July 2020 BBC News. (2020). Sudan scraps apostasy law and alcohol ban for non-Muslims. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53379733>.

blasphemous are banned in the country. Zimbabwe too considers itself a Christian nation; liberty of expression and religious belief are guaranteed in principle, but blasphemy is punishable by imprisonment.<sup>7</sup> As these and other blasphemy laws show, in a number of African states, freedom *of* religion is more easily guaranteed than freedom *from* religion.<sup>8</sup>

Alongside legislation related to blasphemy and proselytism, countries may maintain a *de facto* religious character through everyday practices and informal forms of discrimination. Indeed, while many African countries are formally secular, historical perception of the country as associated with any single religion can affect how non-conforming traditions will be considered.<sup>9</sup> A case in point is Chad, which inherited the principle of *laïcité* from the French, but where, in reality, religion plays a crucial political role, from the choice of national holidays to total roadblocks in front of mosques during Friday prayers and a near-total halt of public activities throughout Ramadan. As the executive director of an Islamic aid association noted when we interviewed him in 2016, *laïcité* affects everybody—even the president—meaning that everybody has a duty to practice a religion, be it Islam, Christianity or animism. And yet, even in Chad one can hear dissenting voices, amplified perhaps due to the power of social media. For example, after the *Conseil des Ministres* recently took a decision not to abandon the religious oath upon taking formal state office, a Chadian commented on the news by saying that, “it is tough that the President of the Republic does not understand the word secularism (*laïcité*) as intended. In which other country do people call themselves secular (*laïc*) and yet oblige open-minded people to take oaths associated with a specific religion? The problem is that these people, who devalue themselves for the position by accepting to take this oath [...] Myself, I was born without a religion and that ain’t no sin if I keep my status of no religion rather than being smart and profit from religious opportunities” (Charfadine, 2020).<sup>10</sup> Beyond any legal action against them, African nones and atheists risk subjecting themselves to social ostracization, harassment, and personal attacks.

In many cases, such forceful application of religious normativity is implied rather than explicit and operates on the margins of formal state structure. As religion is a personal matter, in many African countries, individuals may opt to practice less—becoming a “backbencher”, to use a term used by our Christian interlocutors in Kenya—without encountering backlash. For example, the group Atheists In Kenya (AIK), which for years tried to register as a legal entity despite meeting with resistance from a Christian-biased system and individual clerks. When asked by a television crew why they put themselves through all this trouble rather than simply living their private lives as atheists, the society’s vice-president, Francis Maende, reversed the question and posed it to religious people. He points out that the reality on the ground is that, “they use their beliefs to control the laws, they use their beliefs to control our morality, they use their religion to control our behaviour, they use their beliefs to control the rest of society” (KTN News, 2019). In his reply, Maende makes a strong case, as Kenya—*de jure* a secular country where formal mentions of God are limited to what is known as “ceremonial deism” (Corbin, 2009)—is *de facto* religious. For example, a student may be denied loan without a pastor’s recommendation and a child may be rejected from joining the

---

<sup>7</sup> [https://fot.humanists.international/countries/africa-eastern-africa/zimbabwe/.](https://fot.humanists.international/countries/africa-eastern-africa/zimbabwe/)

<sup>8</sup> [https://end-blasphemy-laws.org/countries/africa-sub-saharan/;](https://end-blasphemy-laws.org/countries/africa-sub-saharan/) [https://bti-project.org/de/home.html?&cb=00000.](https://bti-project.org/de/home.html?&cb=00000)

<sup>9</sup> While one might assume that religious minorities in African, who often suffer marginalization, might advocate for formal secularism as it would offer them greater parity, scholars propose that in countries with a dominant religious majority and relatively weak liberal and democratic tradition, the notion of secularism can actually be utilized against minority religions and contribute to their ongoing discrimination Mahmood, S. (2015). *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*. Princeton University Press. .

<sup>10</sup> Translated from French by the authors.

scouts for refusing to swear before God as part of the scouts' pledge (Droz & Maupeu, 2013; Gez, 2018).

Incidentally, AIK are members of Humanists International, a global organization inspired by the ideals of the Enlightenment and aimed to "build, support and represent the global humanist movement, defending human rights, particularly those of non-religious people, and promoting humanist values world-wide".<sup>11</sup> While in Western Europe, Humanists have a history dating back over a hundred years and enjoy popular respectability and media presence (Engelke, 2015), the movement's few sister chapters in Africa are all recent. The organization's affiliated organizations operate in several Anglophone African countries including Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. The handful of members in each of these countries often face discrimination and at times even physical violence, which the Humanists lay out in their annual *Global Freedom of Thought Report*. Such concerns have also been raised by other sources, such as the International Religious Freedom Report which is published by the United States' State Department (Grim & Finke, 2006). A Pew study noted that, out of Sub-Saharan Africa's 48 countries, in 2007, there have been reported incidents of violence intended to enforce religious norms in eight countries and hostilities over questions of conversion in five countries. Ten years later, in 2017, the number of reported incidents increased dramatically, to 31 countries and 10 countries respectively (Pew Research Center, 2019).<sup>12</sup> Due to legal and social pressures encouraging religious conformity, Africans are disincentivised to explore avenues of disbelief and nones are cautioned against coming out.

### Third Challenge: Data and Methods

Scholarly tools for estimating the number of religious nones are primarily quantitative, and largely draw on surveys and national censuses.<sup>13</sup> Adding to the general, well-recognized challenges of quantitative data collection (Bessière & Houseaux, 1997) are a number of challenges that, while not unique to African contexts, are exacerbated in contexts suffering from weakened democratic institutions, limited infrastructure and financial resources, and systemic marginalization on the global stage.

Generally speaking, two main types of data are available: national censuses and survey data. While national censuses tend to be more comprehensive, not all African censuses ask about religion, and certainly not all use the same wording of questions and categories of answers. Moreover, state-led censuses are more likely to be subject to political intervention and bias. At the same time, global surveys of religion such as the World Values Survey and the ISSP include, at best, a handful of African countries. Therefore, in order to get a snapshot of the region as a whole, we opt to concentrate on Africa-focused survey data, principal among which are the Afrobarometer and Pew surveys. However, these are not unproblematic either: as Zurlo and Johnson (2016, p. 53) point out, as samples tend to be much smaller in surveys than in censuses, they are especially likely to misrepresent small religious minorities—, in our case, religious nones.

---

<sup>11</sup> <https://humanists.international/about> (accessed 9 December 2020).

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that, while unaffiliated Africans appear to experience greater harassments these days, this appears to be part of a wider and alarming trend towards religious-based violence across the world.

<sup>13</sup> This being said, some scholars seek to complement quantitative with qualitative, such as Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme, who rely on opinion polls and national censuses as well as on thirty face to face interviews. Thiessen, J., & Wilkins-Laflamme, S. (2020). *None of the Above: Nonreligious Identity in the US and Canada*. NYU Press.

In many parts of Africa, data collection is hampered by local challenges including conflict, poor infrastructure, and sheer distance. Yet another issue concerns the definition of a resident to be sampled, and the sampling methods themselves – such as with regard to accounting for nomadic communities and informal settlements (Randall & Coast, 2015; Sandefur & Glassman, 2015). But even when such challenges are surmounted, the sensitivity of religious data in many parts of Africa means that data ought to be approached with care. Scholars working with quantitative data know that, as Morten Jerven describes regarding development statistics in African contexts, that “numbers have the power to both misinform and inform political debate” (Jerven, 2013, p. 2). Indeed, we have already mentioned the pro-religious biases in many parts of the continent, which are partially a matter of popular conception and partially baked into actual governmental and legal systems. In many African contexts, religion is highly politicized and associated with intra-national alliances and tensions. Religious statistics may be used to advance political arguments, to perpetuate certain religio-political hegemonies, and to affirm discriminative practices. As Frans Wijzen (2007, p. 34n45) observes, “in many countries in Africa, religious statistics are highly politicized”. This is especially the case when religious and ethnic identities overlap and are tied to political power structures. For example, in Chad, where the last national census took place in 2009 but whose data on religious adherence have still not been published due to concern over the delicate political implications of redrafting the demographic balance between Muslims and Christians (information provided by a Chadian politician, 2016). In Nigeria, another country divided between Christians and Muslims, Muslim leaders threatened to boycott the 2006 national census should the government keep ‘religion’ on the identity list, apparently out of concern that the census would identify theirs to be a minority religion (Abioje, 2015, p. 89). Beyond any specific country case study, questions such as whether the continent as a whole has a larger Muslim or Christian proportion are explosive rhetorically if not practically.<sup>14</sup>

In light of these sensitivities, one should not be surprised that the topic of religious statistics is approached with trepidation. The United Nations makes no clear recommendations regarding the collection of data on religion in national censuses, and indeed, African countries manifest a range of approaches to the topic. Some countries—e.g., Mali, Nigeria, Zimbabwe—exhibit the sensitivity of the question by pivoting over time between registration and non-registration of religion in national censuses. Among those countries which do capture religion, the choice of categories is in itself revealing of the government’s expectations towards normativity. Thus, Dasre and Hertrich (2017, p. 16) give the example of Senegal, which in its 2002 census distinguished between five categories of Islam while offering no option for “traditional religion” or “no religion”. As shown by Véronique Duchesne et Marc Pilon in their historical survey of over 200 censuses from African countries from the 1950s until today,<sup>15</sup> over time, the question of religious affiliation is increasingly being used: While in the 1960s only 28% of African censuses asked about religion, by the 1990s this percentage reached 46% and climbed further to 62% in the 2000s and 2010s.<sup>16</sup> Demonstrating the growing

---

<sup>14</sup> According to the Pew Research Center, sub-Saharan Africa has a ration of about two Christians to one Muslim. Of course, counting the continent as a whole substantially adds to the number of Muslims. Pew Research Center. (2010b). *Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*.

<sup>15</sup> These observations are based on early results presented by Marc Pilon, in the context of Project DEMORELAF (“*Démographie des religions en Afrique: un enjeu scientifique et politique*”, 2021-2022, project directed by Véronique Duchesne et Marc Pilon, and financed by the University of Paris), during a *Journée d’étude* held in Paris on the 18<sup>th</sup> December 2020.

<sup>16</sup> This increase is in tension with a global trend, and might be explained in terms of religion’s prominence in African contexts. According to Zurlo and Johnson, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, about half of countries asked about religion in their censuses, but starting from the 1990s, countries have increasingly been dropping the question, “deeming it to be too controversial, too expensive, or uninteresting” Zurlo, G. A., & Johnson, T. M. (2016).

acknowledgement of the category of religious nones, out of the 105 censuses that do mention religion, it is employed in 64.<sup>17</sup>

Lastly, drawing on the two challenges that we have laid out above, we should consider the implications of pro-religious/anti-secularist sentiments for African respondents' admission of non-normative irreligiosity. In highly pro-religious contexts, the grouping of nones with atheists and agnostics can be regarded as particularly problematic, as atheism in particular is associated with immorality, hedonism, and in some cases even satanism. Not to mention that, in some strict Muslim countries, such as Mauritania, having no religion is actually illegal. If we consider, for example, the case of Kenya's last two national censuses, it is noteworthy that, while the 2009 census counted 922,128 (2.4%) people with "no religion",<sup>18</sup> by the 2019 census, which grouped "no religion" and "atheists" together, that number dropped to 755,750 (1.6%). Thus, while it might appear like a broadening of the category to include more options, in reality the association with atheism can deter people who are not practitioners but who also feel uncomfortable with the seemingly anti-religious sentiments associated with atheism—an observation that was also made in the United States (Cragun, 2016; Hackett, 2014).<sup>19</sup> Such differences in categories also seem to account for the statistical divergences that we have encountered early on in the text, with estimations of the proportion of religious nones in sub-Saharan Africa ranging from less than 1 % (Johnson & Zurlo, 2020) to 3.2% (Pew Research Center, 2012a, p. 25) and more. This discrepancy may be explained, at least in part, by looking at terminologies: while the World Christian Encyclopaedia employs a faith-based classification that includes only atheists and agnostics, the Pew relies on self-definition, creating a broader category that includes all those who, to paraphrase Davie (1990), believe but do not belong.

### Three Open Questions

#### First Open Question: Divergences and Prospects

One of the main questions regarding nones in Africa relates to current and predicted trends. In contrast to the sharp increase in the number of religious nones across the Global North (Keysar, 2014; Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017), in Africa, religion is largely seen as "ascending" (Zuckerman et al., 2016, p. 72). For example, Takyi (2017) cites religion's renewed public presence and influence in many parts of Africa to argue that, "while studies [...] of some Western countries such as the United States have reported some decline of faith, the growth of atheism, and the increasing number of people who consider themselves as nonreligious or admit to belonging to no religion, the opposite appears to be happening in many parts of Africa" (Takyi, 2017, p. 202). The author further argues for "a significant decline" (2017, p. 203) in

---

Unaffiliated, Yet Religious: A Methodological and Demographic Analysis. In *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion* (pp. 50-74). Brill.

<sup>17</sup> In the 1960s, the question of nones was mentioned in 4 African censuses, in the 1970s in 6, in the 1980s in 6, in the 1990s in 12, in the 2000s in 21, and in the 2010s that number already reached 15 by the middle of the decade. According to the data presented by Pilon and his colleagues, no other category of religious classification shows such a clear trend of increasing inclusion.

<sup>18</sup> In the enumerator instruction manual to the 2009 census, "No religion" is explained to the enumerator thusly: "These are people who do not believe in the existence of supernatural powers. They do not follow any particular religion." In other words, from the census' point of view, religious nones have been seen as similar to atheists even before the word atheism has been added explicitly.

<sup>19</sup> As Hackett observed, "since Americans may perceive that others consider religious identity to be socially desirable, it may be that the 'nothing in particular' option in the Pew Research question is not as awkward for respondents with weak religious identity to choose as is Gallup's 'no religion' option, which may be perceived as a more direct denial of religion". Hackett, C. (2014). Seven things to consider when measuring religious identity. *Religion*, 44(3), 396-413. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2014.903647> .

Africans who claim to be nonreligious. A case in point is Ghana, where Yirenkyi and Takyi (2010), who rely on the Ghana Health and Demographics Survey, show how, between the late 1980s and the early 2000s, the rate of Ghanaians who claim to be nonreligious dropped from 12% to 4%.

We believe that, in reality, trends in religious nones in Sub-Saharan Africa are less than clear-cut, and may be biased by popular conceptions of “the religious continent” as we laid out above. In the last two decades, Afrobarometer surveys (2002-2018) indicate relative stability in the proportion identifying as unaffiliated. Survey rounds conducted in Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe approximately every three years since 2002 suggest that, on average, around one in twenty residents of these countries is unaffiliated, with only minor fluctuations over that period. Although this group of countries overrepresents the number of religious nones in the whole of Africa, it gives a good indication of the stability of the proportion of people who remain outside the bounds of religious affiliation. Demonstrating the complexity of the question at hand we may consider the work of Pilon and his colleagues (2019) on Burkina Faso. The scholars consider a 1991 demographic study and the censuses of 1996 and 2006, which are the only nation-wide sources of data on religious affiliation. Interestingly, while this period has seen a rise in the number of people claiming “other religion”—from 0.2% in 1991 to 0.6% in 2006, the period has also seen an apparent drop in the number of people claiming “no religion”, from 0.9% in 1991 to 0.6% in 1996 and 0.4% in 2006. This drop surprises the authors, and they wonder whether, indeed, declaring oneself as having “no religion” has meant the same thing for respondents in 1991, 1996, and 2006, and whether factors such as the formulation of the question and the dynamic between surveyor and respondent might not explain this trend. They note that the simple, straightforward articulation of the question—“what is your religion” or, in the case of interviews with household heads, “what is the religion of X”—leaves the researcher with little knowledge about actual practices and beliefs. As they conclude, “in such conditions, what credit and validity can be accorded to results that divide the population by religion?” (Pilon et al., 2019, p. 190, our translation) and add that the interpretation of such results must be done with great care.

Looking towards the future, according to the Pew (2010b), the percentage of religious individuals worldwide is expected to rise, from 88.1% to 91.5% in 2060. The nonaffiliated population is expected to drop from roughly 16% in 2015 to about 13% in 2060 (Kaufmann et al., 2012; Pew Research Center, 2015b, 2017b). This trend may be explained by higher fertility among more religious population, which counterbalances the effect of disaffiliation (Kaufmann et al., 2012; Pew Research Center, 2017). Africa is the only region in the world where the percentage of affiliated is expected to stay fairly stable, 99.3%, by far the highest of any continent.

### Second Open Question: The Profile of African Nones

Yet another open question that requires further clarification touches on the actual profile of African religious nones, including their socio-economic status, political leaning, and any other characteristic. These are especially intriguing concerning the seeming rarity of religious nones: do they represent an intellectual elite heavily influenced by Western ideas—young, educated, urban, and increasingly cosmopolitan? Or do they rather represent a near-opposite in the form of marginalized, socially disintegrated individuals, predominantly rural and possibly cynical towards institutions?

On the whole, African nones do not appear to be heavily influenced by Western ideas. According to Afrobarometer, they do not take a more liberal position than those who are affiliated on a range of issues, including freedom of the press, freedom of speech, women’s

rights and tolerance towards others. The only exception is that the religiously unaffiliated are slightly more amenable to having a homosexual neighbour than are the affiliated (Afrobarometer, 2018). By contrast, in the West, nones tend to be more open-minded, tolerant, liberal, and politically progressive (Pew Research Center, 2020; Thiessen, 2015; Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2020; Williamson & Yancey, 2013, pp. 65-69). This tendency is especially strong in the USA, where since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in particular, religiosity has increasingly come to be associated with right-wing political identification, and the rise of the category of nones in the 1990s has come to be seen as a counterreaction to such identification (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Thus, earlier on, we mentioned the case of Humanists International, whose institutional and ideological canopy accommodates a variety of non-religious groups worldwide. Inspired by the Enlightenment Latin motto *sapere aude* (“dare to think for yourself”), the archetypical Humanist none tends to be intellectually curious and politically progressive. However, these ideals do not seem to correspond to and inspire the experiences of most African nones, who indeed seem to shy from associative groups.

Supporting the idea that African nones do not constitute a highly educated, intellectual elite, we can consider that the unaffiliated in Sub-Saharan Africa tend to have about 4.6 years of schooling – about half-way between Christians and Muslims (Afrobarometer, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2010b, 2016a).<sup>20</sup> Indeed, while secularization theories have long held that disaffiliation is positively correlated with education especially among younger people (e.g., Hayes, 2000; Newport, 1979), in Africa at least, nones are not particularly concentrated among a rising urban middle class (Afrobarometer, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2010b).<sup>21</sup> Indeed, as Victor Agadjanian (2017) shows with regard to Mozambican women, disaffiliation is in fact negatively correlated with schooling. But while the data suggest that the religiously unaffiliated do not represent an overwhelmingly young, urban, Western-oriented intellectual elite, there is little evidence suggesting the opposite, namely, socio-economically marginalized and concentrated in rural areas. Furthermore, unlike nones in the West (Cragun, 2016), there is no clear correlation between nonaffiliation and nonmarriage in Africa (Pew Research Center, 2010b; Yirekyi & Takyi, 2010).

In other words, the socio-demographic characteristics of African nones do not differ significantly from those who are religious affiliates in terms of education or urbanization (Afrobarometer, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2010b). The only two clear-cut socio-demographic observations regarding African nones appear to be their gender and age. With regard to gender, they conform to global gender patterns (Cragun, 2016; Edgell et al., 2017; Schnabel, 2018; Voas et al., 2013), with African men more likely to be unaffiliated than women by a margin of 65% to 35% (Afrobarometer, 2018). Secondly, regarding age, African unaffiliated are notably young: while globally, the religiously unaffiliated are older than the overall global population—with a median age of 34 compared to 28 overall—Sub-Saharan African nones have a median age of 20 (Pew Research Center, 2012a, p. 27). While Africa indeed has the world’s youngest population, African nones do stand out by being younger than the continental median age.

---

<sup>20</sup> In terms of formal years of education, Sub-Saharan African Muslims have an average 2.6 years of schooling while Christians 5.8 years Pew Research Center. (2016b). *Key findings on how world religions differ by education*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/12/13/key-findings-on-how-world-religions-differ-by-education/>. Adjusted to Christianity’s regional majority, religious nones therefore have a level of education that is somewhat average to the region.

<sup>21</sup> In the West, such ideas about correspondence between education and loss of religiosity have been reconsidered Schwadel, P. (2014). Birth cohort changes in the association between college education and religious non-affiliation. *Social Forces*, 93(2), 719-746.

There is, however, some evidence to support the notion that African nones are marginalized and tend to be somewhat sceptical of, or cynical towards, institutions, at least as regards the political sphere. Compared to other Africans, nones are less likely to be engaged politically either via voting, activism, or simply showing interest in politics (Afrobarometer, 2018). This is in line with findings by Manglos and Weinreb (2013), who argue that, generally speaking, religiosity in Africa is correlated with political involvement: “We find that active religious membership positively shapes political interest in almost all countries. Yet contrary to extant elite-focused literature, we find no tradition to be uniformly more ‘political.’ Further, religious identity and religious minority status frequently condition the effects of education on political interest. The effects of religion on interest in politics are therefore context-dependent, exhibiting both inclusive and divisive potential.” Such ideas are confirmed by Sperber and Hern (2018) using data from Zambia and also support findings from outside the continent (e.g., Schwadel, 2020).

### Third Open Question: The Religiosity of African Nones

The third and last open question revolves around the religious identity of the African nones. As we have seen in the first section, people may claim to be nones but still maintain personal religiosity and even entertain complicated relations with organized religion. Indeed, while nones tend to be less religious than the affiliated, they do not necessarily eschew all aspects of religious life (Lim et al., 2010; Zurlo & Johnson, 2016). These general observations seem to be applicable to the African case. Findings from a survey of nineteen countries in sub-Saharan Africa indicate that around four-fifths of the unaffiliated believe in god, over a third attend religious services at least once a week, around half pray at least once a week, and a majority considers religion to be important in their lives (Pew Research Center, 2010b). While this rate of religiosity may seem high—especially compared to Western contexts—it is substantially lower than the rates of belief and observance found among African Christians and Muslims, as well as among followers of traditional African religions.

With regard to the latter point, one of the questions that require our attention is to what extent might African nones in fact be followers of traditional African religions. This seems to be the view taken by Zurlo and Johnson, who argue that, “in Africa, the unaffiliated religious are mainly tribal religionists” (Zurlo & Johnson, 2016, p. 70). Explaining their claim, the authors propose that, “followers of tribal religions in Africa often say that they have ‘no religion’ because they are thinking in terms of ‘world religions’ and that in fact many of them practice traditional, tribal or animist religions” (Zurlo & Johnson, 2016, p. 67). We certainly agree with the authors that, through long processes of delegitimization and demonization led by representatives of Christianity and Islam, traditional African religions have often come to be perceived as lesser religions and even as no religion at all. However, and while some religious nones may indeed engage with aspects of traditional religions, the same is true of Christianity and Islam and does not necessarily imply misclassification. In fact, even though we have seen that the demographic profile of African nones is less than straightforward, studies show that, when it comes to attitudes on religious matters, African nones speak in a fairly clear voice. According to the Pew (2010b), on average, nones score approximately fifty percentage points lower than followers of traditional, tribal or animist religions on a range of measures of traditional religious practice, such as owning traditional African sacred objects and participating in traditional ceremonies to honour or celebrate ancestors. Although relative to Christians and Muslims, nones tend to be more engaged in traditional religious rituals, the gap between nones and Muslims is often narrow, and indeed, Muslims are actually more likely than nones to seek the help of traditional healers (Pew Research Center, 2010b). Furthermore, the

unaffiliated exhibit lower levels of trust in traditional leaders than either Christians or Muslims (Afrobarometer, 2018). It should be made clear that both the Pew and Afrobarometer studies, as well as every African national census that we came across, allow for respondents to opt for ‘traditional’ as their (exclusive) religion. Scholars who argue that, in Africa, being a none is code for traditionalism would have to explain why respondents did not simply tick the ‘traditionalist’ box when that option was presented to them.

A more subtle option, perhaps, is that the category of nones includes those who do not find themselves in the exclusivist categorization forced by such surveys. In this reading, the notion of nones should be read as closest to what we have seen above as ‘nothing in particular’, but in fact suggesting a plurality of adherences that cannot be accounted for by the way surveys tend to be designed. Such a line of argumentation seems to be based in the established recognition that African societies are largely syncretistic. As a Catholic priest in Chad told us in 2015, “among both Christians and Muslims in the country, there are some animists, even if they do not present themselves as such”. Similarly, traditionalist Chadians who convert to Islam are unlikely to desist from their traditional practices, for example by continuing to carry traditional amulets which they then reinterpret in Islamic terms. To add one of countless other examples, we can think of South Africa, where, in 2003, newly appointed archbishop Buti Tlhagale was criticized when he went to his homestead to present his new status to his ancestors. While often meeting with resistance from religious institutions, such combinations are widely common. While divergent traditions may be integrated syncretistically, at times they may be kept firmly apart. This much is reflected in Janet McIntosh’s notion of ‘polyontologies’, which points to people’s ability to concurrently entertain multiple, seemingly incongruent cosmogonies (McIntosh, 2009, 2019; Premawardhana, 2018). We emphasize that, outside of such collapse of exclusivity of affiliation, it is quite unlikely that respondents would identify as nones simply out of a non-denominational conviction (for example, within Christianity). While recent years have seen palpable liberalization of religious markets across the region and the emergence of countless new churches, the possibility of non-denominationalism tends to be taken into consideration by survey designers, thereby minimizing the likelihood that non-denominational respondents identify as nones.<sup>22</sup>

While all of this may affect on some Africans’ discomfort with rigid classificatory survey questions, our analysis of available data, and especially the Afrobarometer surveys, shows that African nones tend to maintain an ambivalent, even critical stance towards religious institutions, with generally low levels of trust in religious leaders. In fact, such skepticism expands beyond the religious realm, as African nones also seem to exhibit substantially lower levels of trust in political, civil, and military institutions (Afrobarometer 2018). The association between no religious affiliation and institutional mistrust is in line with findings elsewhere (Kasselstrand, 2019). Such experience goes against the general global tendency to regard religious leaders as trustworthy, certainly compared to political and other non-religious leaders.<sup>23</sup> We can hypothesize that, in many Africans’ experience, such distrust may be the

---

<sup>22</sup> For example, a major Pew study on Africa offers two-step questioning: “What is your present religion, if any?” followed by specifications for either Muslims or Christians. These include, in the case of Christianity, a variety of inexplicit options such as “nondenominational church”, “something else”, “none in particular”, “just a Protestant, not further specified”, and “just a Christian, not further specified”. In light of this detailed questioning structure, it is highly unlikely that nondenominational Christians or Muslims would opt to identify themselves as religious nones. Pew Research Center. (2010b). *Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*.

<sup>23</sup> For example, a World Bank study based on interviews with over 60,000 poor men and women showed that, in the Global South, religious organizations enjoy substantially greater trust than secular leaders. Narayan, D., Chambers, R., Shah, M. K., & Petesch, P. (2000). *Voices of the Poor: Crying out for Change*. New York: Oxford University Press for the World Bank. , *ibid*.

result of controversies such as overemphasis on prosperity teachings, religion's overinvolvement in religious matters, or recurring moral scandals by religious leaders who "preach water and drink wine" (Gez & Droz, 2015; Shipley, 2009). While some who have been disillusioned respond by dropping religion from their menu altogether, the negative connotations associated with being an African none mean that most maintain some relations with their religious institutions, if only nominally.

## Conclusion

For all parties concerned, there is power in the simplistic narrative of Africa as the religious continent; and myths are hard to let go of. While it is true that, generally speaking, Africans tend to be highly religious, we must not overlook the possibility that some are not. In this article, we laid out the foundation for much-needed research into religious nones in Sub-Saharan Africa. Recognizing the scarcity of existing scholarship, we approached the topic with caution, highlighting problematic preconceptions regarding Africa as the "notoriously religious continent" where nones are necessarily a "negligible" phenomenon. At the same time, we should also be cautious of projecting onto African nones Western experiences of secularism. For one thing, we have seen that applying the Western archetype of the none as a secularized humanist is unsupported by the data. The association between religiosity and "existential security—that is, the feeling that survival is secure enough that it can be taken for granted" (Norris & Inglehart, 2004, p. 4) also does not seem to apply to this specific group, as the data does not show that their survival is more secure than that of their compatriots either materially or otherwise.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, to speak about African nones we may actually have to rethink the fundamental division between religious and nonreligious people, which is grounded in a Western binarism that is far from accepted by all, certainly within more religious societies (Beyer, 2016). Considering the centrality of choice of terminologies and framing of questions in quantitative studies, it might be that the true salience of nones simply remains unaccounted for by global studies geared towards Western conceptions of (non-)religiosity.

With this in mind, we encourage researchers to design studies aimed at uncovering the actual characteristics and extent of the phenomenon. In designing such studies, scholars should remember that atheists are a largely invisible group. Unlike religious individuals who may feature in institutional registers and attend community events, nones pose challenges for both qualitative and quantitative studies, as they largely evade detection through associative ties. This appears all the more true in strictly pro-religious contexts, where social and legal sanctions are used against non-normative religious behaviour. Scholars should identify creative methods to both comparative and country-specific studies and consider employing local terminologies, making sure that their language makes sense to the studied populations. The use of sensitive, non-stigmatizing approaches may actually have a bearing on statistical findings as more Africans would feel comfortable stepping forward. Beyond honing the accuracy of their measurements, scholars may have a real role to play in the contestation of and the non-stigmatization of those opting out from religion. The issue of nones in Africa can no longer be regarded as a non-issue.

---

<sup>24</sup> Also see the Inglehart–Welzel cultural map of the world, which, based on the World Values Survey, charts correlations between a so-called traditional/secular-rational values axis and a survival/self-expression values axis. Since first produced in the late 1990s, the map, which is routinely updated, has been locating African countries, alongside Islamic countries, as the world's most traditional and most survival-oriented. Inglehart, R., & Welzel, C. (2010). Changing mass priorities: The link between modernization and democracy. *Perspectives on politics*, 551-567.

## Bibliography

- Abioje, P. O. (2015). Christianity in contemporary African religious space. In *Contemporary Perspectives on Religions in Africa and the African Diaspora* (pp. 79-99). Springer.
- Afrobarometer. (2018). *Afrobarometer Survey Round 7*. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/>
- Agadjanian, V. (2017). Women's schooling and religious mobility: Joining, switching, and quitting church in a Christian sub-Saharan setting. *Sociology of Religion*, 78(4), 411-436.
- Bâ, A. H. (1965). Préface. In G. Dieterlen (Ed.), *Textes sacrés d'Afrique noire*. Gallimard.
- Balazka, D. (2020). *Mapping Religious Nones in 112 Countries: An Overview of European Values Study and World Values Survey Data (1981-2020)*.
- BBC News. (2020). Sudan scraps apostasy law and alcohol ban for non-Muslims. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53379733>
- Beider, N. (Forthcoming 2021). The Zeal of the Convert Revisited. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.
- Bessière, C., & Houseaux, F. (1997). Suivre des enquêteurs. *Genèses. Sciences sociales et histoire*, 29(1), 100-114.
- Beyer, P. (2015). From atheist to spiritual but not religious: A punctuated continuum of identities among the second generation of post-1970 immigrants in Canada. In *Atheist Identities-Spaces and Social Contexts* (pp. 137-151). Springer.
- Beyer, P. (2016). Sensing religion, observing religion, reconstructing religion: Contingency and pluralization in post-Westphalian context. *Social Compass*, 63(2), 234-250. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768616628794>
- Campbell, C. (1971). *Toward a sociology of irreligion*. Macmillan International Higher Education.
- Charfadine, A.-m. (2020). Conseil des ministres : le serment est exigé pour certaines fonctions et corporations. *TchadInfos*. <https://tchadinfos.com/politique/le-serment-confessionnel-est-exige-pour-certaines-fonctions-et-corporations>
- Corbin, C. M. (2009). Ceremonial Deism and the Reasonable Religious Outsider. *Ucla L. Rev.*, 57, 1545.
- Cragun, R. T. (2016). Nonreligion and atheism. In *Handbook of religion and society* (pp. 301-320). Springer.
- Da Costa, N. (2020). Non-Affiliated Believers and Atheists in the Very Secular Uruguay. *Religions*, 11(1), 50.
- Dasre, A., & Hertrich, V. (2017). Comment aborder les pratiques religieuses en Afrique Subsaharienne? Les enseignements d'une enquête longitudinale en milieu rural malien.
- Daswani, G. (2015). *Looking Back, Moving Forward: Transformation and Ethical Practice in the Ghanaian Church of Pentecost*. University of Toronto Press.
- Davie, G. (1990). Believing Without Belonging: Is This the Future of Religion in Britain? *Social Compass*, 37(4), 455-469.
- Deutsche Welle. (2020a). Nigeria: UNICEF criticizes boy's 10-year jailing for blasphemy. <https://www.dw.com/en/nigeria-unicef-criticizes-boys-10-year-jailing-for-blasphemy/a-54529075>
- Deutsche Welle. (2020b). Sharia court in Nigeria sentences singer to death for blasphemy. <https://www.dw.com/en/sharia-court-in-nigeria-sentences-singer-to-death-for-blasphemy/a-54521334>
- Dickow, H. (2005). *Democrats without Democracy? Attitudes and opinions on society, religion and politics in Chad*. Centre International des Sciences de l'Homme: Byblos.
- Dickow, H. (2012). *Religion and Attitudes towards Life in South Africa. Pentecostals, Charismatics and Reborns*. Nomos.
- Droz, Y., & Maupeu, H. (2013). Christianismes et démocratisation au Kenya. *Social Compass*, 60(1), 79-96.
- Edgell, P., Frost, J., & Stewart, E. (2017). From existential to social understandings of risk: Examining gender differences in nonreligion. *Social Currents*, 4(6), 556-574.

- Engelke, M. (2015). Good without God" Happiness and pleasure among the humanists. *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 5(3), 69-91.
- Gez, Y. N. (2018). *Traditional Churches, Born Again Christianity, and Pentecostalism: Religious Mobility and Religious Repertoires in Urban Kenya*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gez, Y. N., & Droz, Y. (2015). Negotiation and Erosion of Born Again Prestige in Nairobi. *Nova Religio*, 18(3), 18-37.
- Gez, Y. N., Droz, Y., & Maupeu, H. (2020). Religious tribalism, local morality and violence in Christian Kenya. In E. Chitando & J. Tarusarira (Eds.), *Themes in Religion and Security in Africa*. Routledge.
- Gez, Y. N., Droz, Y., Soares, E., & Rey, J. (2017). From Converts to Itinerants: Religious *Butinage* as Dynamic Identity. *Current Anthropology*, 58(2), 141-159.
- Grim, B. J., & Finke, R. (2006). International Religion Indexes: Government Regulation, Government Favoritism, and Social Regulation of Religion. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, 2(1), 1-40.
- Hackett, C. (2014). Seven things to consider when measuring religious identity. *Religion*, 44(3), 396-413. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2014.903647>
- Hall, D. D. (Ed.). (1997). *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*. Princeton University Press.
- Hanf, T., & Dickow, H. (2009). Meinungen in Zeiten des Mordens. Ruander über Gesellschaft, Identität, Politik, Gewalt und Zusammenleben um die Jahreswende 1993-1994. In H. Theodor, H. Weiler, & H. Dickow (Eds.), *Entwicklung als Beruf* (pp. 190-201). Nomos.
- Hayes, B. C. (2000). Religious independents within Western industrialized nations: A socio-demographic profile. *Sociology of Religion*, 61(2), 191-207.
- Haynes, N. (2017). *Moving by the Spirit: Pentecostal social life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Vol. 22). University of California Press.
- Inglehart, R. (2021). *Religion's Sudden Decline: What's Causing It, and What Comes Next?* Oxford University Press.
- Inglehart, R., & Welzel, C. (2010). Changing mass priorities: The link between modernization and democracy. *Perspectives on politics*, 551-567.
- Jenkins, P. (2011). *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. Oxford University Press, USA. <https://books.google.pt/books?id=b-hUWm88QGkC>
- Jerven, M. (2013). *Poor Numbers: how we are misled by African development statistics and what to do about it*. Cornell University Press.
- [Record #14482 is using a reference type undefined in this output style.]
- Kasselstrand, I. (2019). Secularity and Irreligion in Cross-National Context: A Nonlinear Approach. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 58(3), 626-642. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12617>
- Kaufmann, E., Goujon, A., & Skirbekk, V. (2012). The end of secularization in Europe?: A socio-demographic perspective. *Sociology of Religion*, 73(1), 69-91.
- Keysar, A. (2014). Shifts along the american religious-secular spectrum. *Secularism and Nonreligion*, 3(1), 1-16.
- KTN News. (2019). *Against All Gods: Atheists believe that religious faith is nothing but delusion - part two*. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJItMoT3X3k&ab\\_channel=KTNNewsKenya](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJItMoT3X3k&ab_channel=KTNNewsKenya)
- Lim, C., MacGregor, C. A., & Putnam, R. D. (2010). Secular and liminal: Discovering heterogeneity among religious nones. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 49(4), 596-618.
- Loimeier, R. (2001). Säkularer Staat und islamische Gesellschaft: die Beziehungen zwischen Staat, Sufi-Bruderschaften und islamischer Reformbewegung in Senegal im 20. Jahrhundert.
- Mahmood, S. (2015). *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*. Princeton University Press.
- Manglos, N. D., & Weinreb, A. A. (2013). Religion and interest in politics in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Social Forces*, 92(1), 195-219.

- Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy*. East African Educational Publisher.
- McGuire, M. B. (2008). *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. Oxford University Press.
- McIntosh, J. (2009). *The Edge of Islam: Power, Personhood, and Ethnoreligious Boundaries on the Kenya Coast*. Duke University Press.
- McIntosh, J. (2019). Polyontologism: When “Syncretism” Does Not Suffice. *Journal of Africana Religions*, 7(1), 112-120.
- Narayan, D., Chambers, R., Shah, M. K., & Petesch, P. (2000). *Voices of the Poor: Crying out for Change*. New York: Oxford University Press for the World Bank.
- Newport, F. (1979). The Religious Switcher in the United States. *American Sociological Review*, 44, 528-552.
- Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2004). *Sacred and secular: religion and politics worldwide*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pew Research Center. (2009). *Not All Nonbelievers Call Themselves Atheists*. <https://www.pewforum.org/2009/04/02/not-all-nonbelievers-call-themselves-atheists/>
- Pew Research Center. (2010a). *I’m BOTH Jewish and an atheist. How would you classify me in your reports?* <https://www.pewresearch.org/2010/10/19/im-both-jewish-and-an-atheist-how-would-you-classify-me-in-your-reports/>
- Pew Research Center. (2010b). *Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*.
- Pew Research Center. (2012a). *The Global Religious Landscape: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Major Religious Groups as of 2010*. <https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2014/01/global-religion-full.pdf>
- Pew Research Center. (2012b). *“Nones” on the Rise*. <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>
- Pew Research Center. (2015a). *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*. <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>
- Pew Research Center. (2015b). *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050*. <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>
- Pew Research Center. (2016a). *Educational attainment among the religiously unaffiliated*. <https://www.pewforum.org/2016/12/13/educational-attainment-among-the-religiously-unaffiliated/#sidebar-does-more-education-lead-to-less-religion>
- Pew Research Center. (2016b). *Key findings on how world religions differ by education*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/12/13/key-findings-on-how-world-religions-differ-by-education/>
- Pew Research Center. (2016c). *Which countries still outlaw apostasy and blasphemy?* <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/29/which-countries-still-outlaw-apostasy-and-blasphemy/>
- Pew Research Center. (2017a). *Sub-Saharan Africa will be home to growing shares of the world’s Christians and Muslims*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/19/sub-saharan-africa-will-be-home-to-growing-shares-of-the-worlds-christians-and-muslims/>
- Pew Research Center. (2017b). *Why people with no religion are projected to decline as a share of the world’s population*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/07/why-people-with-no-religion-are-projected-to-decline-as-a-share-of-the-worlds-population/>
- Pew Research Center. (2019). *A Closer Look at How Religious Restrictions Have Risen Around the World*. <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/15/a-closer-look-at-how-religious-restrictions-have-risen-around-the-world/>
- Pew Research Center. (2020). *Religiously unaffiliated people more likely than those with a religion to lean left, accept homosexuality*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/28/religiously-unaffiliated-people-more-likely-than-those-with-a-religion-to-lean-left-accept-homosexuality/>
- Phiri, I. A. (2003). President Frederick J. T. Chiluba of Zambia: The Christian Nation and Democracy. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 33(4), 401-428.

- Pilon, M., Degorce, A., & Langewiesche, K. (2019). Les enjeux des chiffres: la démographie des religions au Burkina Faso. In A. Degorce, L. O. Kibora, & K. Langewiesche (Eds.), *Rencontres religieuses et dynamiques sociales au Burkina Faso* (pp. 165-196). Amalion.
- Premawardhana, D. (2018). *Faith in Flux: Pentecostalism and Mobility in Rural Mozambique*. University of Pennsylvania Press. <https://books.google.ch/books?id=ZQVODwAAQBAJ>
- Randall, S., & Coast, E. (2015). Poverty in African Households: the Limits of Survey and Census Representations. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 51(2), 162-177.
- Samuri, M. A. A., & Quraishi, M. (2014). Negotiating apostasy: applying to "Leave Islam" in Malaysia. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 25(4), 507-523.
- Sandefur, J., & Glassman, A. (2015). The Political Economy of Bad Data: Evidence from African Survey and Administrative Statistics. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 51(2), 116-132.
- Schnabel, L. (2018). More religious, less dogmatic: Toward a general framework for gender differences in religion. *Social science research*, 75, 58-72.
- Schwadel, P. (2014). Birth cohort changes in the association between college education and religious non-affiliation. *Social Forces*, 93(2), 719-746.
- Schwadel, P. (2020). The Politics of Religious Nones. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 59(1), 180-189.
- Sevinç, K., Coleman III, T. J., & Hood Jr, R. W. (2018). Non-Belief: An Islamic Perspective. *Secularism and Nonreligion*, 7(1).
- Shiple, J. W. (2009). Comedians, pastors, and the miraculous agency of charisma in Ghana. *Cultural Anthropology*, 24(3), 523-552.
- Sperber, E., & Hern, E. (2018). Pentecostal Identity and Citizen Engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa: New Evidence from Zambia. *Politics & Religion*, 11(4).
- Takyi, B. K. (2017). Secular Government in Sub-Saharan Africa. In P. Zuckerman & J. R. Shook (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism* (pp. 201). Oxford University Press.
- Thiessen, J. (2015). *The Meaning of Sunday: The Practice of Belief in a Secular Age*. McGill-Queen's University Press. <https://books.google.pt/books?id=yiKnCgAAQBAJ>
- Thiessen, J., & Wilkins-Laflamme, S. (2017). Becoming a Religious None: Irreligious Socialization and Disaffiliation. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 56(1), 64-82. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12319>
- Thiessen, J., & Wilkins-Laflamme, S. (2020). *None of the Above: Nonreligious Identity in the US and Canada*. NYU Press.
- Voas, D., McAndrew, S., & Storm, I. (2013). Modernization and the gender gap in religiosity: Evidence from cross-national European surveys. *KZfSS Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 65(1), 259-283.
- Wijzen, F. (2007). *Seeds of conflict in a haven of peace: from religious studies to interreligious studies in Africa*. Rodopi.
- Williamson, D. A., & Yancey, G. (2013). *There is no god: Atheists in America*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- WIN-Gallup International. (2012). *Global Index of Religion and Atheism: Press Release*.
- Yirenkyi, K., & Takyi, B. K. (2010). Some Insights into Atheism and Secularity in Ghana. In P. Zuckerman (Ed.), *Atheism and Secularity* (Vol. 2, pp. 73-89). Praeger.
- Zuckerman, P., Galen, L. W., & Pasquale, F. L. (2016). *The Nonreligious: Understanding Secular People and Societies*. Oxford University Press.
- Zurlo, G. A., & Johnson, T. M. (2016). Unaffiliated, Yet Religious: A Methodological and Demographic Analysis. In *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion* (pp. 50-74). Brill.

## **ABI Working Paper series**

The ABI working paper series focuses on socio-political issues in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East.

### **Already published issues**

15 | Michael Cobb, Annika Hampel, Antje Missbach, Dilshad Muhammad, Fabricio Rodríguez  
“Insiders” and “Outsiders”: Reflections on Hierarchies, Privileges and Positionalities in  
Academic Research

ABI Working Papers Freiburg | 2020

14 | Gurol, Julia Gurol; Wetterich, Cita

Perspectives on Field Research in Security-Sensitive Spaces - Insights from China and the  
Southern Mediterranean Area

ABI Working Papers Freiburg | 2020

13 | Dickow, Helga

The Ambiguities of Cohabitation: Religious Attitudes between Tolerance and  
Fundamentalism in Chad

ABI Working Papers Freiburg | 2019

12 | Kößler, Reinhart

The Bible and the Whip – Entanglements surrounding the restitution of looted heirlooms

ABI Working Papers Freiburg | 2019

11 | Jenss, Alke; Lehmann, Rosa

Multi-Scalar Struggles: The Selectivity of Development Governance in Southern Mexico

ABI Working Papers Freiburg | 2019

10 | Le Noan Anne-Clémence; Glawion, Tim

Education nationale en territoire rebelle Le cas du lycée de Ndélé en République  
Centrafricaine - State education in rebel-held territory The case of the Ndele secondary  
school in the Central African Republic

ABI Working Papers Freiburg | 2018

9 | Wetterich, Cita

Gendered security perspectives of the refugee “crisis” in the British and German Media: a  
securitization of gender?

ABI Working Papers Freiburg | 2018

8 | Mehler, Andreas; De Vries Lotje

Les Conditions marginales du néopatrimonialisme performant: Pourquoi l’Afrique ne «  
marche » pas dans la République centrafricaine

ABI Working Papers Freiburg | 2018

7 | Niyonkuru, Aimé-Parfait

Judicial Protection of Human Rights in Post-Conflict Burundi: Gap Between Legal Principles and Practices Freiburg

ABI Working Papers Freiburg | 2018

6 | Plänitz Erik Fixed on the Rural - Neglecting the Urban? Reviewing spatial disparities in Climate Change – Conflict Literature

ABI Working Papers Freiburg | | 2017

5 | Franzisca Zanker

The Politics of EU and African Migration Governance: From Rhetoric to Practice

ABI Working Papers Freiburg | 2017

4 | Ottmann, Martin, Haas, Felix

Does Peace Trickle Down? Micro-Level Evidence from Africa

ABI Working Papers Freiburg | 2017

3 | Schütze, Benjamin

Misrepresenting the Contextual and Idealising the Universal - How US Efforts at Democracy Promotion Bolster Authoritarianism in Jordan

ABI Working Papers Freiburg | 2016

2 | Solarin, Adepeju O.

Respect, Restorative Justice and the Oslo 1993 Talks

ABI Working Papers Freiburg | 2015

1 | Lübke, Christian von

Continuity and Change - Societal Power and Accountability in Democratic Indonesia

ABI Working Papers Freiburg | 2015