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### May 13, 2015: Religion Trends in America

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Title: Religion Trends in America

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5/13/2015—I suppose that I should be expected to be happy about the news reported yesterday by the Pew Research Center that the group of which I am a member, the religiously unaffiliated—the nones—is rapidly growing. But I'm not. The numbers are startling. As of 2014, the nonaffiliated are now 23% of the adult American population. (Presumably, the real percentage is even higher since this is self-reporting). Meanwhile, the percentage of self-identified Christians is 71%. Sounds high, but it was 81% just a few years ago and 90% if I remember correctly in 1963. Well, what of it? My concern is with the future of American life. We forget that, according to the sociologist Robert Putnam—the Bowling Alone guy—going to church is one of those aspects of social capital that help wealthier people live better lives and help their children advance—along with other things, like getting and staying married. Today, if people are not going to some kind of church, chances are that their kids are not going to do well. We don't think of things this way, of course. But having a church is like any other part of a rich social life. Not having one is not just a declaration of independence from God. It is also cutting one more social tie in life. One more depressing fact, from Frank Bruni in today's New York Times—the percentage of Americans who believe the country is on the wrong track is higher than ever: 62% to 28%. This trend has continued uninterrupted for the past ten years. Now of course, there is a sense that we are on the wrong track; by almost any measure the trends are bad for America. But since America is also doing pretty well today by any world standard and much better than we have been since the 2008 economic crisis, you would think the surveys would at least show improvement. But they do not. Is that because religion is also a source of optimism about the future and America is less religious? America is going to continue to get less religious: 35% of the millennials are unaffiliated. Real Christian commitment is already pretty rare—I noticed last week that many Catholics mistake references at a Catholic funeral to resurrection with references to heaven, for example. There is no point bemoaning this. But if declining religion is not going to mean declining everything else, nonaffiliation is going to have to be translated into new affiliation. I don't know what social forms that will take. But I do know that nonreligious life is going to have to be social and have substantive content—a story if you will about the nature of reality. A story from which to live.