

THE
AMERICAN BELIEFS
STUDY
RELIGIOUS PREFERENCES & PRACTICES



June 2024

The Nones: Uncertainty and Disinterest about God and Jesus

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Intro

Everyone has religious beliefs. Even atheists have their opinions, or stake out their positions, on religious matters. Atheists believe there is no God, prayer is futile, there is no holy book, worship is senseless, and Jesus was just a man. Many Americans don't give a lot of thought to questions of spirituality or morality, or even consider them important. But even with that, to say, "Religion is not important," actually expresses a belief about religion.

The American Beliefs Study asked a carefully-designed, representative sample of 15,000 Americans about their beliefs and behaviors related to religion. The Study found that 27% of Americans count themselves among the Nones—people with no religious

affiliation—a large and growing sector of the society. In Report 7 of this series, we saw that the Nones are not all atheists. In fact a strong majority of the Nones can't put their finger on what they believe about a god or God.

Two questions in the Study asked all respondents, including the Nones, what they believed about God and Jesus. Their responses reveal important traits about the religious beliefs of the non-religious. This is helpful and useful for any church that cares about the spiritual condition of the Nones. The best way to know what the Nones believe is to ask them, and that's exactly what the American Beliefs Study did.

The Nones and God: Much Uncertainty

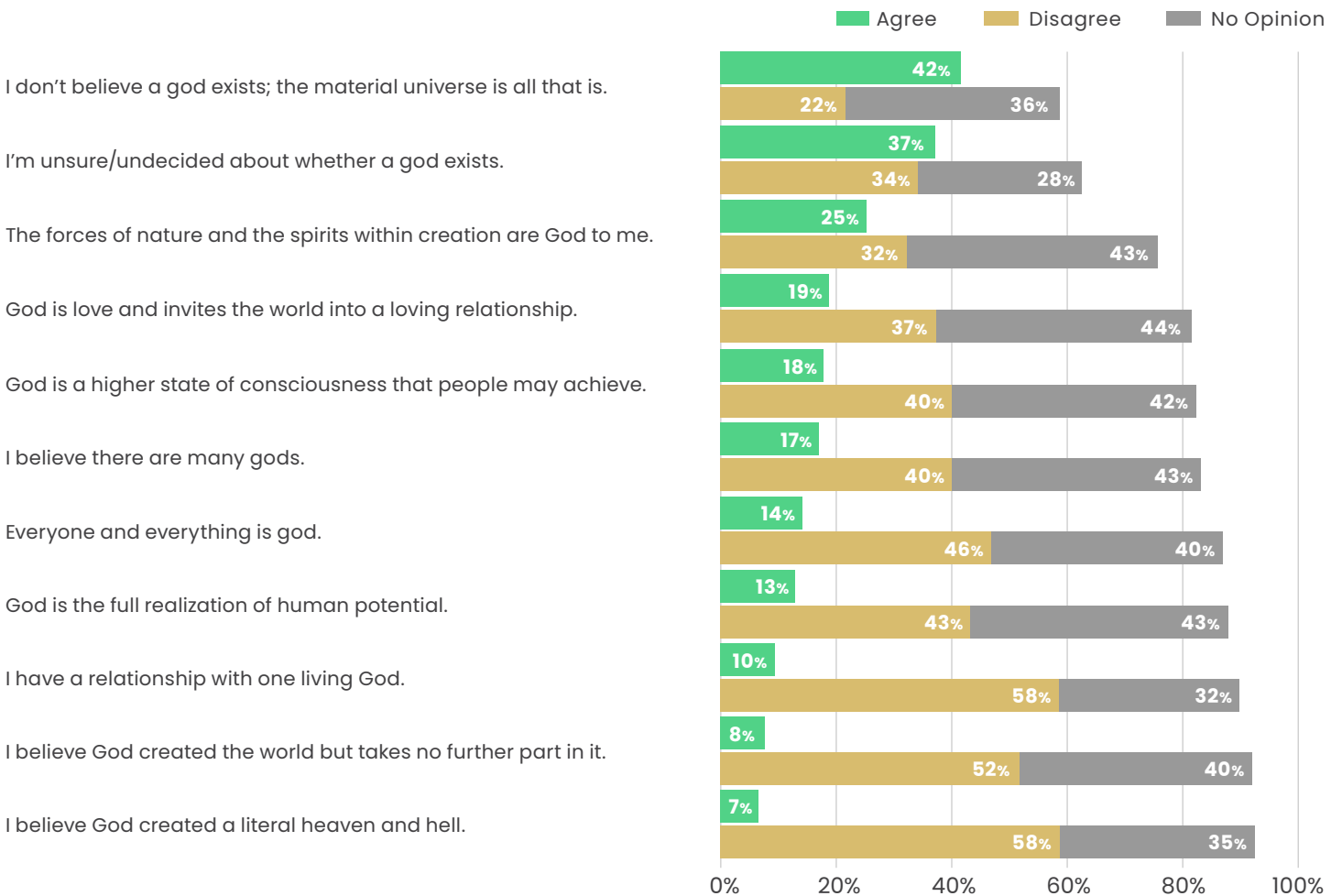
The Nones in this Study responded to 11 different statements about “the characteristics or existence of a god.” The statements did not just address whether or not there is a god, but about what that God or god

might be like. Respondents rated each statement for their agreement or disagreement on a five-point scale. The Nones who marked “Strongly agree” or “Somewhat agree” are combined on Figure 9.1

into “Agree.” Those who marked “Strongly disagree” or “Somewhat disagree” appear as “Disagree.” Respondents could also indicate a middle rating for “No opinion,” which turned out to be a significant option.

— FIGURE 9.1

NONES DIVIDED ON WHO GOD IS - OR IS NOT



Percent of responses by 3,889 Nones to the question, “Many people have different views about the characteristics or existence of a god. Read the following statements and indicate your level of agreement or disagreement.” Certain items may not total 100% due to rounding. American Beliefs Study, 2021

The Nones and God: Much Uncertainty

The Existence of God – Or Not

Two of the statements in this list speak directly to the question, “Is there a God?” The first such statement is, “I don’t believe a god exists; the material universe is all that is.” 42% of the Nones agreed with this, and no other statement received a higher level of agreement. So it would seem settled: 42% of Nones are atheists and therefore 58% believe in God or some concept of a god. Actually, it’s not as simple as that. The 42% of “Agree” responses breaks down to 23% that chose “Strongly agree” and 19% that chose “Somewhat agree.” Those in the latter 19% lean toward atheism but hold on to some uncertainty about the question. Even more telling is the fact that more than a third of the Nones (36%) marked “No Opinion.” **This broad middle ground of uncertainty, combining “Somewhat agree,” “Somewhat disagree,” and “No opinion,” covers nearly two in three of the Nones (65%).**

Is God real? Nearly two in three of the Nones just aren’t sure.

On the side of theism, 22% of the Nones disagree with the idea that there is no God, and of those, 12% marked, “Strongly disagree.” So while most of the Nones are unsure, a significant percentage clearly believe in the existence of God or a god, and another 10% (those who marked “Somewhat Disagree”) lean toward believing.

The second statement that most directly reveals how the Nones think about the existence of God is, “I’m unsure/undecided about whether a god exists.” 34% disagreed with this statement, so about one-third of the Nones feel at least fairly clear that there either is, or is not, a god—which leaves about two-thirds who are uncertain. Thirty-seven percent agreed with the statement, so are definitely “unsure/undecided,” while another 28% marked “No opinion,” expressing a kind of double uncertainty—they are unsure about whether they’re unsure. It’s probably fair to interpret this group of responses as apathy; these Nones seem to be saying, “Whether or not there’s a god is not something I think about,” or “The matter is not important to me.”

These findings allow the Church to get a better understanding of where dialogue with, or witness to, the Nones might begin. **For some of the Nones, it would be unhelpful to begin a conversation about spirituality by talking about God as if he exists, since they don’t accept that premise.** Some might say the fact that two-thirds of the Nones have no interest in the topic may be the most significant barrier to initiating a productive conversation with them about God.

But it could also be a conversation starter. For most of the Nones, such a conversation could begin by talking about the concept of God, since they either believe in God or are at a place of uncertainty that probably includes some measure of openness. **The key to a productive conversation appears to lie in discerning just how certain any individual non-believer is on the question of whether God exists.** Simply asking one of the Nones how they arrived at their position (or lack of a position) on God could help develop a relationship, and consistent experience shows that a relationship is the crucial pathway for deeper engagement on spiritual issues.

The Nones and God: Much Uncertainty

If There Is a God, What is He (or is She, or It, or They) Like?

Beyond the statements about God's existence, the Study offered six different options about who or what God might be, allowing respondents to agree or disagree on each one, despite any logical inconsistency that might result. As seen in Figure 9.1, these are as follows, in the order of the Nones' level of agreement with them.

1. "The forces of nature and the spirits within the creation are God for me." 25% of the Nones affirmed this animist viewpoint, 32% rejected it and 43% were unsure.
2. "God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship." One in five of the Nones (19%) agreed with this version of Christian theism. However, 37% disagreed and 44% were unsure.
3. "God is a higher state of consciousness that people may achieve." 18% of the Nones—again about one in five—agreed with this humanist viewpoint, while the others either rejected it (40%) or were unsure (42%).
4. "I believe there are many gods." While one in six of the Nones (17%) agreed with this polytheist

view, more than four times as many either rejected it (40%) or expressed uncertainty (43%).

5. "Everyone and everything is god." One in seven of the Nones accepted this pantheist statement (14%), while three times as many disagreed (46%) and 40% were unsure.
6. One in eight of the Nones (13%) agreed with another statement of humanism, "God is the full realization of human potential." The remaining Nones split on whether to disagree with this statement or claim uncertainty (43% each).

Some observations from this data:

- None of the god-affirming options received a strong response. The highest agreement was 25%, which is significant, but still far from a majority. **No clear, non-Christian, alternative concept of God has taken hold in a big way among the Nones.**
- Atheism holds a stronger place among the Nones than any of these alternatives, by a wide margin. As we have seen, 42% of the Nones agreed with the statement, "I don't believe a god exists; the material universe is

all that is." The highest-scoring item on this list of six options for a concept of God, animism, scored at only 25%.

- None of these options received a tiny response. Even the lowest-scoring item on the list was affirmed by 13% of the Nones in the sample. Among the Nones, there are several, very different ideas about God at play, at least to some extent.
- These responses reflect the extent to which Hindu and Buddhist concepts (polytheism, pantheism), Enlightenment concepts (humanism), and concepts from indigenous peoples, like American Indians (animism) have found their way into the broader American culture. Again, none of these has taken a dominant position, but all are present and embraced by at least some of the Nones.
- The second-highest-scoring statement on this list, "God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship," is consistent with Christian theology. Not all the Nones have abandoned a Christian concept of God, even if they have abandoned religious affiliation.

The Nones and God: Much Uncertainty

About one in five of the Nones accept a Christian concept of God, at least to some extent. And the Nones seem to be more certain of what God is NOT, than what God is.

The highest score on this list was given to the animist statement, “The forces of nature and the spirits within the creation are God for me.” This has come into American culture from neopaganism and other, various, earth-centered spiritualities, but the largest influence is probably from American Indian religions with their ties to ecological activism. The influence of the Enlightenment has evidently done more to drive people from belief in God (to atheism), than it has to shift peoples’ beliefs to a more human-centered concept of God (to various forms of humanism). Buddhist and Hindu ideas about God or a god (pantheism, polytheism) have come into the culture, but have not won over many Americans.

For Christian churches, whose purpose is to unveil the nature of God to man, realizing that the Nones have greater certainty about what God is NOT than what God IS will likely be difficult to reconcile. But again, within this statement lies the opportunity for Christian churches and Christians to demonstrate,

relate, and reveal the truth of a loving God to an ambivalent subculture of the Nones.

The Real Winner among God-Concepts: “No Opinion”

When the Nones looked at these six ideas about what God might be like, their favorite response was, “No opinion.” Interestingly, the percentages of that response clustered tightly, all between 40% and 44%.

1. “God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship.” 44% of the Nones responded “No opinion.”
2. “God is the full realization of human potential.” 43% of the Nones responded “No opinion.”
3. “I believe there are many gods.” 43% of the Nones responded “No opinion.”
4. “The forces of nature and the spirits within the creation are God for me.” 43% of the Nones responded “No opinion.”
5. “God is a higher state of consciousness that people may achieve.” 42% of the Nones responded “No opinion.”
6. “Everyone and everything is god.” 40% of the Nones responded “No opinion.”

In general, it seems the Nones don’t care much about God, one way or the other. The topic is not one of great interest to them, no matter what idea of God or god they lean toward. Evidently, for a large percentage of them, it’s not something they think about much.

Most of the Nones accept that God could be real, but don’t agree on who or what God is, and tend to be apathetic about the topic.

Churches who seek to reach out to the Nones are not likely to find among them a hunger for God. The Nones have needs—everyone does—but most of them have not become seekers after God in response to those needs. The message “God is the answer to your needs” is likely to miss the mark among the Nones, who are generally uncertain that God even exists. Instead, from other findings in the Study, - **offering acceptance, assistance and caring to the Nones without spiritual preconditions is likely the best way to establish trust, leading to relationships and a greater openness to deeper spiritual discussions.**

The Nones and God: Much Uncertainty

Where the Nones Disagree Strongly

Among the 11 statements rated by the Nones, three stand out, with the highest percentage of respondents indicating disagreement. These are the only ones where a majority disagreed—not that the Nones disagreed with each other, but that they disagreed with the statements; in fact, there was a fairly-strong unity among the Nones in dismissing these three items.

1. **“I believe God created the world but takes no further part in it.”** 52% of the Nones disagreed with this statement and only 8% agreed. This idea, deism, was somewhat popular in the 18th century in both Europe and America. It served as a way to respond to the glories and complexities of nature while giving no space to religion or the Church. In contrast, this idea is not attractive to most of the Nones in the 21st century. There are not many deists among us anymore.

2. **“I believe God created a literal heaven and hell.”** 58% of the Nones disagreed with this statement and only 7% agreed, which was the lowest level of agreement in the list and tied for the highest level of disagreement. In contrast, 80% of Practicing Christians agreed with this statement and 9% disagreed. Though it comes directly from traditional Christian theology, the idea of hell in particular is known to be unpopular within American culture at large. This response serves to help answer the question, “To what extent do the Nones still hold to Christian teachings, despite their rejection of participation in the Church?” The answer is that there are definite limits on how much they retain Christian concepts. They don’t just drop participation; they drop the theology.

It seems that the Dones – Nones who left a Christian community – don’t just drop participation; they drop the theology.

3. **“I have a relationship with one living God.”** 58% of the Nones disagreed with this statement and only 10% agreed. So is there is a large slice of the American population who would say, “I’m not a religious person, but I’m a very spiritual person”? The Nones would all, by definition, say, “I’m not a religious person.” Most of them would at the same time say they don’t have a relationship with God, or at least with “one living God.”

For the most part, even the Nones who believe in God or a god don’t see themselves as having a relationship with him (or she, or it, or them).

All the other statements in this set deal with what the respondents might think or believe about God. This is the only one that deals with how the respondents see themselves relating to whatever God or god they might believe in, and the answer is that few of them see any relationship there.

The Jesus of the Nones is Not the Jesus of the New Testament

Right after the question about God, the American Beliefs Study asked respondents to rate nine similar statements about Jesus, some consistent with Christian faith and others not. Again, the Nones could respond from a series of five options, from

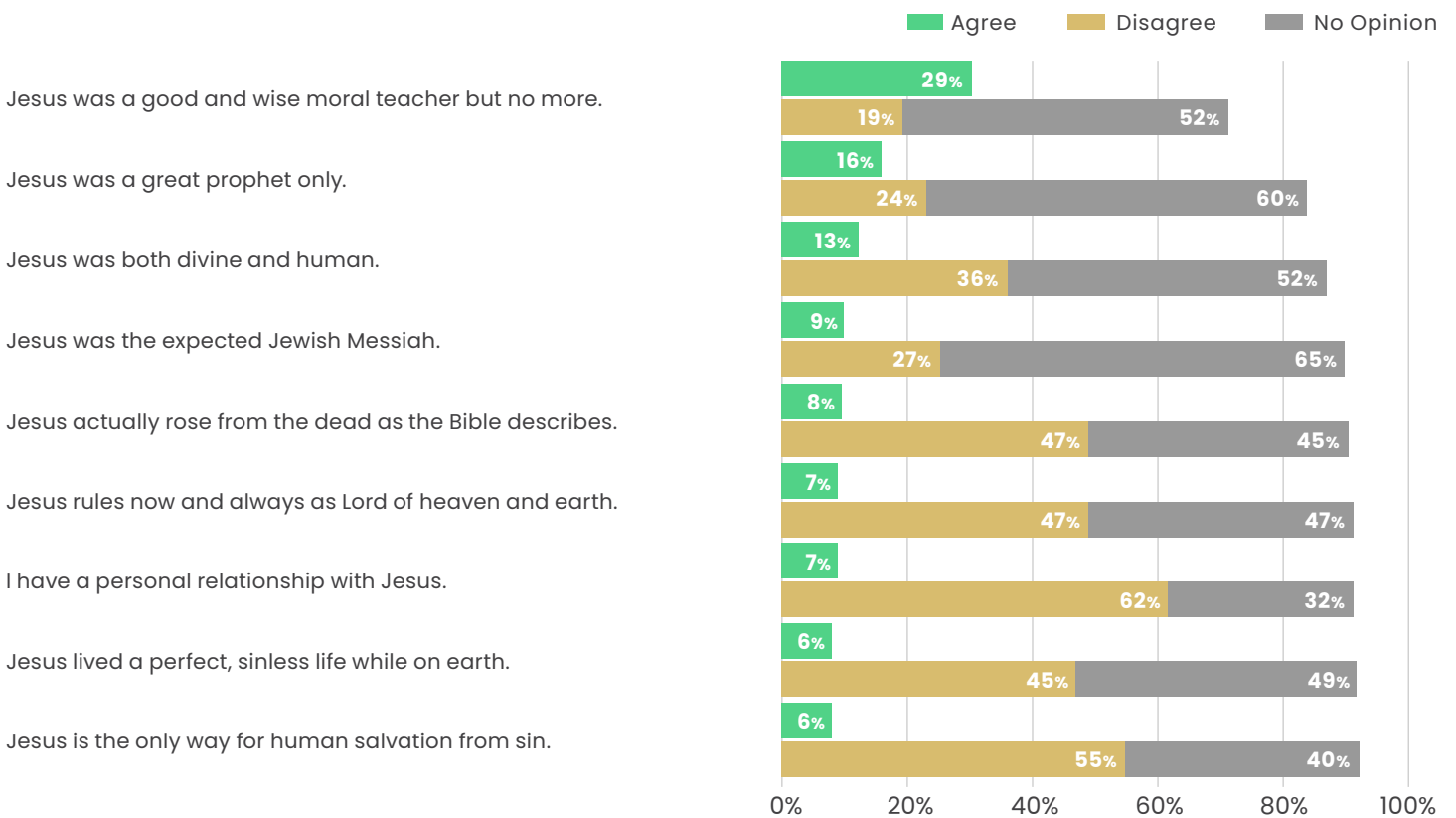
“Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree,” with “No Opinion” in the middle. Figure 9.2 combines the two responses on each end of the scale into a total Agree and Disagree, and charts these alongside No Opinion.

The Nones Reject Historic Christology

The Nones’ responses to these statements help Christians see what we face in helping them to understand Jesus as the Bible presents him.

— FIGURE 9.2

THE NONES HOLD FEW TRADITIONAL BELIEFS ABOUT JESUS



Percent of responses by 3,889 Nones to the question, “Many people have different views about the person Jesus. Read the following statements and indicate your level of agreement or not.” Certain items may not total 100% due to rounding
American Beliefs Study, 2021

The Jesus of the Nones is Not the Jesus of the New Testament

Six of the nine statements about Jesus reflect New Testament teaching. On average, 43% of the Nones disagreed with them and only 8% agreed. Specifically:

- “Jesus is the only way for human salvation from sin.” 55% disagreed, 6% agreed.
- “Jesus rules now and always as Lord of heaven and earth.” 47% disagreed, 7% agreed.
- “Jesus actually rose from the dead as the Bible describes.” 47% disagreed, 8% agreed.
- “Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life while on earth.” 45% disagreed, 6% agreed.
- “Jesus was both divine and human.” 36% disagreed, 13% agreed.
- “Jesus was the expected Jewish Messiah.” 27% disagreed, 9% agreed.

The strongest disagreement was with the idea of Jesus as the only way for salvation. In comparison, the Nones were more open to the idea that Jesus was both divine and human, or that Jesus was the Messiah, than they were to the idea of him as the way to forgiveness and restoration. Likely some of the Nones reject the idea of Jesus as “the only way,” believing there are many valid

ways to relate to God or the ultimate questions of life. Likely others reject the Christian idea of wrongdoing, sin, and the need for redemption.

It’s also fascinating that there was more objection to the idea of Jesus living a perfect life than there was to the idea of Jesus being both divine and human.

These responses can inform apologetic approaches. A conversation that tries to begin with the fact of the resurrection, for example, won’t likely get far with the Nones, since only eight percent believe Jesus rose from the dead. Or an attempt to start with the sinless life of Jesus will quickly find that only a small percentage of the Nones (six percent) accept this initial premise as true.

When Christians talk to the Nones about faith, we need to understand that their idea of Jesus is different from our idea of Jesus. Our witness must start with knowing the listener.

This is not to say that believers should not try to talk to unbelievers about Jesus. The gospel message is all about Jesus; he is at the center

of Christian faith. It’s only to say that better witness comes from better understanding of where the listener is coming from.

Who Do the Nones Say Jesus Was?

Do the Nones believe Jesus was “a great prophet only”? Not to any great extent. Only 16% agreed with that statement, and 24% disagreed.

Do the Nones believe he was “a good and wise moral teacher but no more”? This idea was only a bit more popular, with 29% agreeing and 19% disagreeing.

The Nones may largely reject the Christian teaching about Jesus, but there is no alternative explanation that has attracted a consensus. It’s much easier to identify who the Nones believe Jesus was not than to identify who the Nones believe he was. They reject one cornerstone (so to speak) without replacing it with another.

Actually, the largest vote by the Nones on both of those alternative ideas was, “No opinion.” On the idea of Jesus as only a great prophet, 60% of the Nones indicated, “No opinion.” On the idea of Jesus as only a great moral teacher, 52% of the Nones indicated, “No opinion.”

The Jesus of the Nones is Not the Jesus of the New Testament

A majority (55%) disagreed with the idea of Jesus as the Savior from sin, but when it came to alternative ideas about who he was, the majority then fell to, “No opinion.”

Disinterest or apathy about the topic show up again. For five of the nine Jesus statements in the list, the highest percentage of responses landed on, “No opinion.” As one example, 27% agreed that “Jesus was the expected Jewish Messiah” and nine percent disagreed, but 65%, nearly two in three, indicated, “No opinion.” Seven of the nine statements earned “No opinion” scores at 40% or above. Even the item with the strongest percentage of disagreement, “Jesus is the only way for human salvation from sin,” where 55% disagreed, saw 40% indicate “No opinion.”

Who was Jesus? The question remains, and it’s a good one. Christians have a clear answer, and the Nones do not. Christians care deeply about the question, and the Nones do not. *When the topic of Jesus comes up, a few of the Nones will have their idea of who he was, more will affirm that whoever he was, he was not what Christians teach, and most will shrug in disinterest, or not consider it an important matter.*

Despite the Nones’ apparent disinterest, the question of Jesus is still a powerful topic for conversations about faith.

To those who consider the topic of Jesus unimportant, Christians can show why it’s of central importance to all of human history and all spiritual understanding. To those who

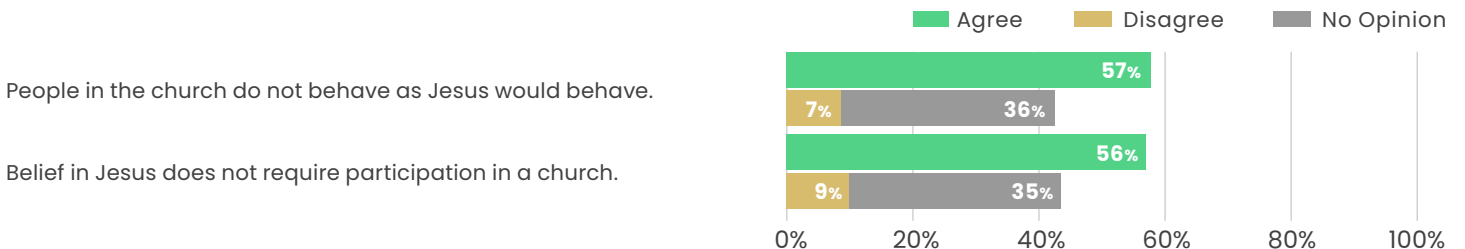
admit they don’t know who Jesus was, Christians have a coherent and compelling answer. Only 7% of the Nones indicated they had “a personal relationship with Jesus,” and 62% said they did not. This is both a challenge and an opportunity. It’s a challenge because of the need to overcome apathy or disinterest. It’s also a challenge because of the need to explain and defend the Christian understanding. But it’s an opportunity because this represents many people who need Christ and the abundant life he offers.

The Nones, Modern Christians and the Christian Church

On two statements in the Study, a majority of the respondents agreed at 56% and 57%. This level of agreement is quite strong, 27 and 28 percentage points higher than the agreement on

— FIGURE 9.3

THE NONES HOLD MODERN CHRISTIANS AND THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN HIGH DISREGARD



Percent of responses by 3889 Nones to the question, “Many people have different views about the person Jesus. Read the following statements and indicate your level of agreement or not.” American Beliefs Study, 2021

The Jesus of the Nones is Not the Jesus of the New Testament

any statement about the person of Jesus. Interestingly, these statements had to do with modern Christians and the Church of today.

Over half of the Nones agreed with the statement, “Belief in Jesus does not require participation in a church” (56%) and only nine percent disagreed. The Nones want to see Jesus as separate from his Church. According to them, belief in Jesus, or a positive opinion about him, is one thing; being part of a church that worships him is another thing, and the first thing need not lead to the second. This, of course, does not fit with New Testament Christianity, where belief, baptism, and participation in the Body of Christ are all tightly linked. But by separating the two, perhaps the Nones allow themselves to hold a positive opinion of Jesus and a negative opinion of the modern Church.

An even higher percentage of the Nones, 57%, agreed with the statement, “People in the church do not behave as Jesus would behave,” and an even lower percentage, seven

percent, disagreed. Here again, affirming that Jesus would behave better than the people in his church implies that the Nones approve of Jesus but not of his Church. This again points to a perceived disconnect. The earlier statement allows the Nones to separate their notions of Jesus from their ideas about his Church. This second statement asserts that modern Christians are out of synch with their own leader, Jesus Christ.

At this point, Christian leaders might object. What do the Nones know about Jesus and what it means to follow him? Who are they to stand as judge over Christians and their level of obedience? Furthermore, this is something of a moot point, as most Christians recognize the call of Christ simply to believe in him, accept his forgiveness, and through that reconciliation to act in ways which might emulate him, as we are able. This is something we can hardly expect non-believers to understand.

Furthermore, the Study shows in exquisite detail just how little the Nones know about the Jesus of the

Bible. And yet they expect Christians to better emulate Jesus, whom they admit they know little about?

As bizarre as it might be, the crux is this: the Nones feel that Christians don’t act how they have been led to believe Christians should.

If church members acted more like Jesus, it would probably be easier for the Nones to believe.

In two different ways these statements show that an evangelistic approach to the Nones requires several steps. Even if a non-religious person comes to the point of accepting that God is real and that Jesus is God, they must then be persuaded to accept Jesus and to accept his Church. It’s not enough to help the Nones see who Jesus really is. That is incomplete until they understand the inseparable connection between Jesus and his Church—as imperfect as his church and the believers in it might be.

Older Nones and Younger Nones on God and Jesus

The Nones do not all think alike, probably on any topic, but certainly on what they believe about God and Jesus. To sort out their differing beliefs by generational cohorts is a helpful avenue of analysis. The American Beliefs Study uses the widely-accepted generational framework from the Pew Research

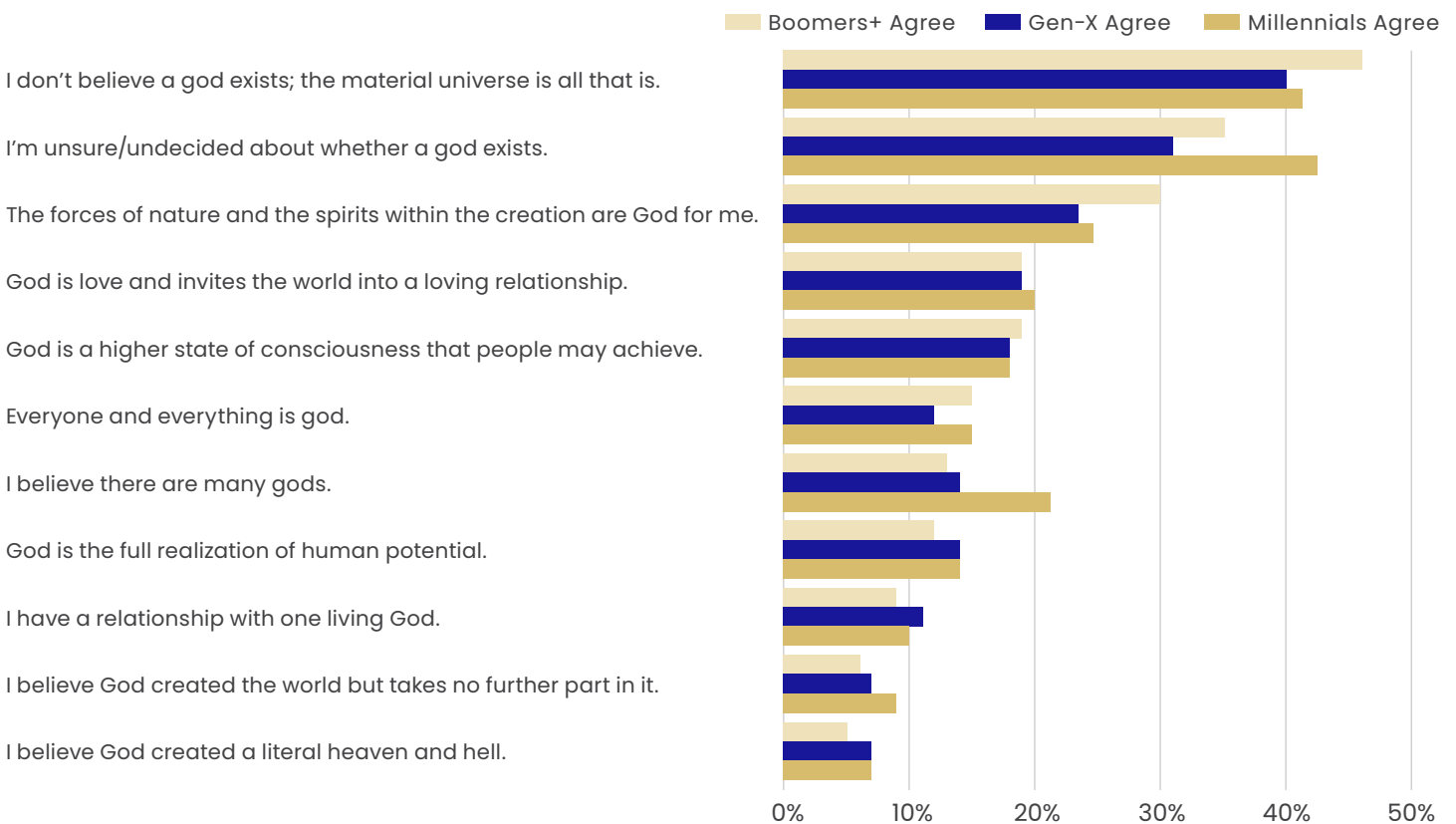
Center that sorts out members of the Silent, Boomer, Gen-X, Millennial, and GenZ generations by the years of their birth.

The following two charts show the percentages of Nones who indicated “Somewhat agree” or “Strongly agree” on the statements about

God and Jesus, by generation. The Study polled so few of the Nones among the Silent generation that their responses were combined in with Boomers’. Similarly, there were so few respondents from the Gen-Z generation that their answers were combined in with Millennials’.

— FIGURE 9.4

AGREEMENT ABOUT GOD BY GENERATIONS OF NONES



Percent of responses from 3889 Nones to the question, “Many people have different views about the characteristics or existence of a god. Read the following statements and indicate your level of agreement or disagreement.” American Beliefs Study, 2021

Older Nones and Younger Nones on God and Jesus

Some of what we learn from this set of responses:

1. The different generations of Nones tend to have similar levels of agreement on what they believe about God. For seven of the 11 statements, the level of agreement between the three age cohorts all fell within a range of three or fewer percentage points. As one example, for the statement, “God is a higher state of consciousness that people may achieve,” Millennials, Gen-Xers, and Boomers agreed at levels of 18%, 18%, and 19%, respectively. As another example, for the statement, “I believe God created the world but takes no further part in it,” they agreed at levels of nine, seven, and six percent. So when Nones think about God, they tend to think along the same lines, no matter their age—but there are a few points of exception.

2. The highest responses across all generations were to the two questions about atheism or uncertainty about the existence of a god.

- On the statement, “I don’t believe a god exists; the material universe is all that is,” 40% or more of all three cohorts of Nones agreed. It’s interesting that the highest level

of agreement, 46%, came from the oldest cohort, at five and six percentage points above the two younger cohorts. This may suggest that confident, determined atheism is in slight decline among the Nones in America. Alternatively, it may be that Nones become firmer in their atheist convictions as they get older; that younger Nones are more open.

- Though there are many atheists among the Nones, no generational cohort of the Nones are majority atheist.
- Millennials were significantly more likely to say they were uncertain about whether god exists, at 42%, compared to Gen-X and Boomer Nones at levels of 31% and 36%, respectively. This goes alongside the 41% of Millennial Nones who agreed they “don’t believe a god exists.”

On the question of whether or not there is a god, More Millennials are “unsure/ undecided” than Gen-Xers or Boomers.

3. The animist view of god is not very popular among the Nones overall, but it is most popular among Boomer Nones. Three in ten Boomer Nones (30%) agreed

that “The forces of nature and the spirits within the creation are God for me,” while just 24% of Millennials and only 23% of Gen-Xers agreed. The counter-cultural spiritual explorations of the 1960s and 1970s brought non-Western god-concepts—animism among them—into American culture. This affected beliefs among Boomers to a degree and there are still some old hippies among them, but not many at all among Gen-Xers or Millennials.

4. While few of the Nones in any generation agreed at a high level with the polytheist statement, “I believe there are many gods,” Millennial Nones were significantly more likely to agree than the Nones in any older Generation. To wit, 21% of Millennials agreed there are many gods, compared to just 14% of Gen-Xers and 13% of Boomers, showing a significant percentage gap between the generations. It could well be that there are more polytheists among Millennial Nones, but a more likely interpretation is that this was a vote for relativism. It seems likely that higher agreement among Millennial Nones was their way of saying, “I don’t believe there is one, true idea of God that is right for everyone.”

Older Nones and Younger Nones on God and Jesus

Generational Differences in the Nones’ Beliefs about Jesus

As with their beliefs about God, the three generational groups of Nones tend to hold similar beliefs about Jesus, with only a couple of glaring outliers. For six of the nine statements on beliefs about Jesus, agreement levels between the three age cohorts fell within a range of

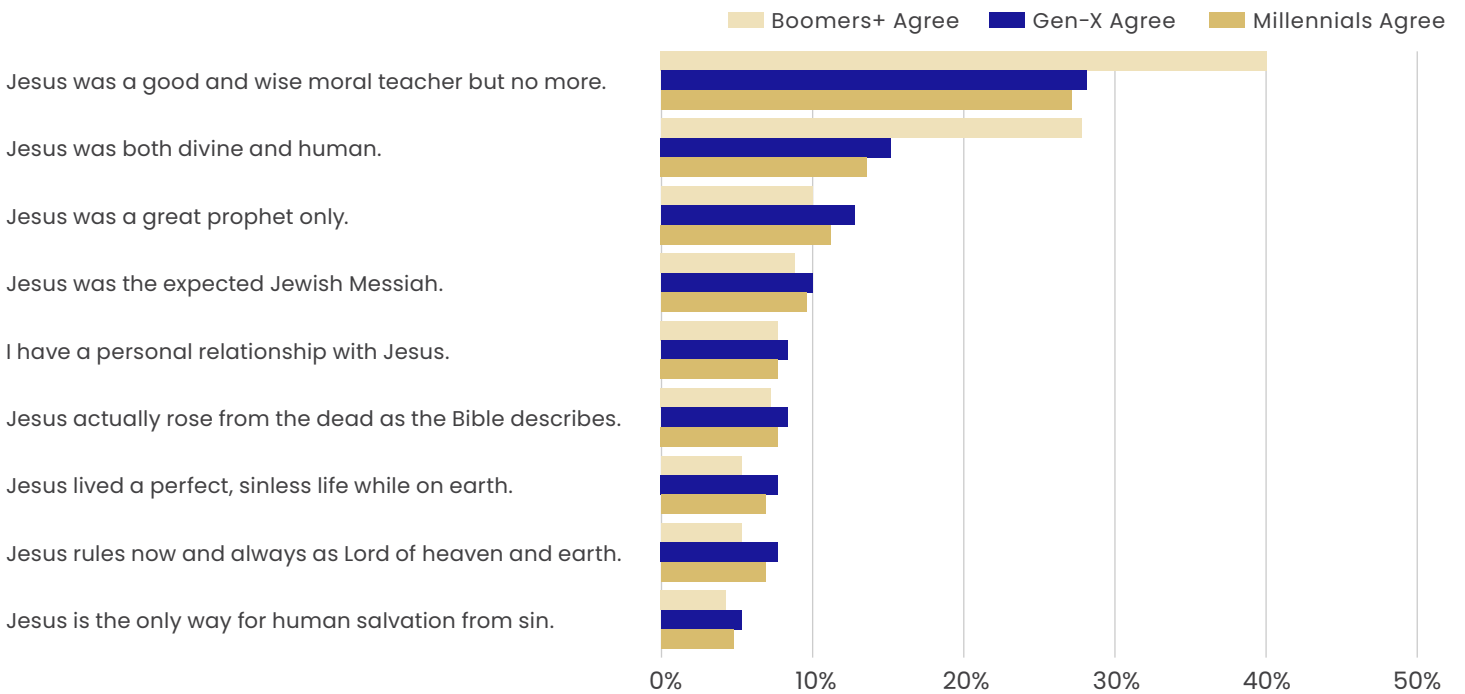
two or three percentage points. For one other statement, “Jesus was a great prophet only,” the three groups agreed within a range of four percentage points.

For two of the statements in this set, Boomer Nones stand out. More than a quarter of them (26%) agreed that “Jesus was both divine and human,” compared to only 14% of Millennial

Nones, and only 16% of Gen-Xer Nones. That is a significant difference, with gaps of 10 and 12 percentage points between generations. This is one of the statements about Jesus that fits with historic Christian teaching, so at least on this point, twice as many Boomer Nones still hold to a New Testament concept of Jesus compared to younger Nones.

— FIGURE 9.5

BOOMER NONES WERE MOST CONFLICTED IN BELIEFS ABOUT JESUS



Percent of responses from 3,889 Nones to the question, “Many people have different views about the person Jesus. Read the following statements and indicate your level of agreement or not.” American Beliefs Study, 2021

Older Nones and Younger Nones on God and Jesus

Very few Boomer Nones agreed with other statements that speak to a Christian understanding of Jesus.

- Only 4% agreed with “Jesus is the only way for human salvation from sin.”
- Only 5% agreed that “Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life while on earth.”
- Only 5% agreed “Jesus rules now and always as Lord of heaven and earth.”
- Only 6% thought “Jesus actually rose from the dead as the Bible describes.”
- Only 8% agreed with the statement, “Jesus was the expected Jewish Messiah.”

So if Boomer Nones don’t believe in the Jesus of the New Testament, what Jesus do they believe in? A significant percentage (40%) see Jesus as a “good and wise moral teacher and no more.” The younger generational cohorts of Nones don’t tend to join in this (limited) consensus. This finding suggests that this alternative, non-Christian idea about Jesus is not growing in influence in the broader culture.

On the question of whether Jesus was no more than a good and wise teacher, there is a yawning gap of 13-to-15 percentage points between generations. 40% of Boomer Nones agreed, as against 27% of Gen-X Nones and 25% of Millennial Nones. We saw earlier in this Report that relatively few Nones agree with the Christian understanding of who Jesus was, but that they didn’t tend to land on any alternative explanation in a big way. Here, we see a significant alternative trend, at least among Boomer Nones, that could provide an inroad to thoughtful discussions with people in this group about the clear evidence for a divine Jesus.

40% of Boomer Nones believe “Jesus was a good and wise moral teacher but no more.”

Who was Jesus? Who *is* Jesus? Why is believing in him important? The Christian answer is consistent and compelling, but requires courage to face, faith to accept and surrender to embrace. Nones of all generations are generally not facing it. Most will admit they don’t know the answer. Beyond that, many don’t consider the question important to their lives.

These findings together show the challenge the Church faces in bringing Christ to the Nones and the Nones to Christ. Hebrews 11:6 says, “Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (ESV). For the Nones in contemporary America, this means they need to be persuaded of at least these things:

- That God exists—and that the God who exists is the God of the Bible.
- That God rewards those who seek him—that the topics of God, Jesus, and faith are relevant, important, and worthwhile to explore.
- That Jesus is the Son of God, God incarnate, Savior, and Lord.
- That coming to Jesus is inseparably linked with coming to his Church.

Christians believe that this chain of persuasion can only happen through the work of the Holy Spirit, but also that God works through his people and his Church. For this work, may we be prepared with knowledge, insight, understanding, and love.

Summary Highlights

- | Nearly two in three of the Nones just aren't sure God is real. Without any common understanding of a real God, Christians must carefully approach this subject with the Nones. The first step could be to think about the possibility that God could be real and beneficial to them, and then to introduce them to Christian concepts of the loving God of Christianity.
- | Despite their apparent disinterest in matters of faith, the question of Jesus is still a powerful topic for conversations about faith and its relevance to all living people.
- | The Nones' idea of Jesus may be vastly different from ours as Christians. The Nones rarely have a cohesive concept of Jesus, and their perceptions are often biased by non-biblical influences. Christian outreach with Nones must start with understanding who they think Jesus Christ was. Such discussions will reveal to us how we may begin to introduce them to the historical Jesus Christ of the Bible.
- | Very few Nones have a clear notion of what Christians really believe. There is greater openness to understanding these beliefs among Millennials and Gen-Z Americans than there is among Boomers and Gen-X.
- | Approaching any member of the Nones on matters of faith will likely require several steps, all of which begin with a personal relationship, which may take a long time. A relationship precedes any openness to discussing spirituality (which often has little significance to them). Discussing spirituality allows conversations about who God is, His nature and that He desires a relationship with them. These preliminary steps may offer the opening to persuade the Nones that God asks us to accept Jesus Christ to establish our relationship with God.

A Brief Methodology

The Research

This research study of American religious preferences, practices, beliefs, and life concerns began in 1991. It has been fielded six times in total, with 2017 and 2021 being the latest editions. ACST is currently responsible for funding this research.

The goal of this study is to equip American Christian churches with hyper-local resources for understanding and reaching their communities. At its heart is a focus on the American religious landscape, especially across generational groups.

This online study among 14,942 American adults was conducted by Campbell Rinker for ACST from October 2020 through February 2021. Results were balanced by US region, 19 'Mosaic' demographic clusters from Experian, and weighted by age to align with known population characteristics. The study carries a maximum margin of error of $\pm 1.97\%$ at the 95% confidence level within any US Census region. A comparative 2017 study involved the same size audience.

Note: Media outlets quoting from this paper are directed to use the summary paragraph above to describe the study in keeping with AP style.

The Questions

Several denominational partners helped design the study questionnaire and the fielding methodology. The authors are deeply indebted to them for their commitment to this project.

Developing the questionnaire is a key step in any research effort. 'Longitudinal' studies such as this require even more care for several reasons – for instance, respondents, language and social issues change over time. Changes like this force adaptations in the questions as well.

Through the years, the questionnaire has retained its focus on these core topics:

- Beliefs About God
- Beliefs About Jesus
- Beliefs About Social and Moral Issues
- Faith Involvement or Non-Involvement
- Life Concerns
- Program and Ministry Preferences
- Religious Affiliations
- Religious Preferences

The Respondents

The study obtained nearly 15,000 completed surveys from a panel of paid respondents. This panel was managed by Dynata, with fielding and analysis conducted by the research firm Campbell Rinker. ACST's partners in this effort followed a rigorous stratified sampling plan carried over from earlier studies.

This plan ensured that the respondent sample accurately represented a distribution across 76 unique groups – 19 geodemographic Mosaic clusters as defined by Experian within each of the four United States Census Bureau regions.

Of course, the nature of surveying involves some level of error. The researchers took care to minimize any bias that might occur with the sampling plan and in framing the questions themselves, including weighting the final data by age to ensure it reflects known proportions in the US population. This weighting delivers a final data set of 14,942 respondents.

THE
AMERICAN BELIEFS
STUDY
RELIGIOUS PREFERENCES & PRACTICES

About The American Beliefs Study™

The American Beliefs Study: Religious Preferences & Practices is a national research initiative conducted by ACS Technologies of nearly 15,000 people across The United States of various beliefs and demographics with the goal of being the definitive single source for the best understanding of the religious preferences and practices of Americans.

AmericanBeliefs.com

MISSIONINSITE

About MissionInsite

The American Beliefs Study is best utilized within MissionInsite as a comprehensive demographic and analysis tool that helps churches and organizations understand what is most important to their congregation and community. By combining multiple top data sources it helps leaders learn what people want in a church, their ministry preferences, income levels, church impressions and what will make them keep coming back. It helps discover what people really want in their church to prioritize what will help them the most. In turn, aiding churches in attracting new people locating prime areas of outreach knowing the activities most people are interested in and will respond to. It also helps ministry leaders know the accurate demographic makeup of a church for better church planning of events, giving, new locations and new ministries. Knowing your neighbor to key to loving your neighbor and MissionInsite helps turns these insights into ministry impact.

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ACS Technologies®

About ACS Technologies®

Founded in 1978, ACS Technologies is a leading, ministry development company most known for its expertise in being a comprehensive provider of church ministry software and service solutions to nearly 50,000 churches, schools, and organizational offices. With the mission to enable everyone in the Church with a personalized ministry environment to make God-honoring decisions in actionable ways, ACS Technologies desires to build the Kingdom by being a trusted ministry partner in the daily life of every church. ACS Technologies stands apart by providing a whole church approach, meeting the needs of the pastor, staff, and congregant, with ministry development tools unique in value to each role and each ministry goal serving each type of church/parish, denominational office, and diocese. ACS Technologies is a privately held independent Christian family-led company based out of Florence, SC with remote team members and offices across the U.S.

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