

RESEARCH NOTE



The rise of the nones and the changing relationships between identity, belief, and behavior

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ABSTRACT

One of the more remarkable trends of the past 30 years is the dramatic rise of individuals who do not identify with any religious tradition. While this trend has been well documented, some of the underlying dynamics and consequences have not been fully appreciated or explicated. We examine the General Social Survey in the period from 1972 to 2014 to examine how the increase in the ‘nones’ is tied to changes in the strength of religious identity among US adults and, in turn, how the rise of the nones has affected the relationships between religious identity, religious belief, and religious behavior. In particular, we show that, as the percentage of US adults who do not identify with a religion has grown, the correlations between religious identification, belief, and behavior have increased. In short, the rise of the nones has led to more congruence between measures of religion.

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Introduction

In his Presidential Address to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in 2009, Mark Chaves (2010) identified an overarching presumption of most social scientific research on religion—that of ‘religious congruence’. Religious congruence refers to the assumption “that religious ideas hang together, that religious beliefs and actions hang together, or that religious beliefs and values indicate stable and chronically accessible dispositions in people” (Chaves 2010, 2). Chaves (2010) identifies the ‘religious congruence fallacy’ as the practice of interpreting or explaining religious phenomena with the background assumption of religious congruence even when it is not supported by data. He argues that people’s beliefs, ideas, values, and behaviors are typically not consistent, but instead are “fragmented, compartmentalized, loosely connected, unexamined, and context dependent” (2010, 2).

Given the common occurrence of religious incongruence, Chaves (2010) argues that we need to pay more attention to the particular contexts and

situations in which we might expect religious congruence versus incongruence. Several scholars have indicated that, historically in the United States, individuals may have felt compelled to identify with a religion due to societal expectations (Sherkat 2014, 113; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Under these conditions, we would expect a great deal of religious incongruence, as false or weak religious identities should not be strongly correlated with actual religious beliefs or practices.¹ However, Darren Sherkat (2014, 114) notes that “this situation has changed, and younger cohorts are freer to choose their attachments and to make their religious commitments fit their religious preference”.

Indeed, in recent years, it has become increasingly normalized to identify as not religious. The increase in the number of individuals choosing not to identify with any religious tradition may be a result of fewer people being religious. However, the increase could be due to fewer non-religious people feeling obligated to identify as such despite their lack of religiosity. To the extent that the latter is the case, we would expect increasing religious congruence between religious identity and religious practice and belief. This is because there would be fewer people who are incongruent by, for example, identifying with a religion without practising or expressing beliefs.

This research note investigates the relationship between religious identity, religious belief, and religious behavior, by using data from the General Social Survey (GSS) in the period 1972–2014 (Smith, Marsden, and Hout 2015).² We expect, and find, that the correlations between these variables have increased over time. Our findings suggest that, while there is still religious incongruence, religious identity, religious belief, and religious behavior are better predictors of each other now than in the past, due to the growth of religious nones.

The rise of the nones

It is no secret that a growing percentage of US adults say that they do not identify with a religious tradition. This group is often referred to as the ‘nones’, which is a function of how surveys, particularly the GSS, ask about and report respondents’ religious affiliation. In its initial question about religious affiliation the GSS asks respondents, “What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?” The last response is coded in the GSS data as ‘none’ and hence this group is referred to collectively as the ‘nones’. In 1972, in the first edition of the GSS, just over 5% of US adults said that they did not have a religion. This percentage began to rise noticeably in the mid-1990s and was just under 21% in 2014. Other surveys have documented the same broad trend, including the Pew Research Center’s Religious Landscape Studies

(Lipka 2015) and the American Religious Identification Surveys (Kosmin et al. 2009).

The precise estimate for the percentage of nones is likely influenced by the responses offered to individuals in the initial religious identity question of the GSS. Individuals who might identify as Christian but do not have a strong specific denominational identity might hesitate to select the Protestant or Catholic options that are offered to them in the initial religion question. Some individuals in this situation might select the 'other' response. Since 1998, those that select the 'other' response have been probed further to provide more information. One of the possible responses coded from this probing is that of simply 'Christian'. The percentage of GSS respondents providing this generic Christian identity has increased alongside the nones. In 1998, just over 1% of GSS respondents gave this Christian response, but, in 2014, over 5% of respondents did so.

However, some GSS respondents might select the 'none' response, even though they might identify as Christian, if they were given this explicit option in the first question. We see some evidence of this if we compare similarly timed surveys with different question wordings. For instance, the GSS of 2010 estimated that 17.98% of US adults were 'nones'.³ In comparison, the Baylor Religion Survey of 2010 offered a wider range of response options for its first religion question (Baylor University 2010). These options included 40 denominational and religious families, a response for 'non-denominational Christian', and a response for 'other' or 'no religion'. The percentage of respondents who chose the 'no religion' response was 13.21%,⁴ which is a few points below the 2010 GSS estimate. Just over 10% of the 2010 Baylor respondents chose the 'non-denominational Christian' response. In short, some but certainly not all of the growth of the nones in the GSS is likely a function of the GSS question wording combined with a rise of a generic Christian identity among US adults.

Regardless of this, it is clear that the percentage of nones has been increasing, particularly over the past two decades. Where has the growth of the nones come from? Has the growth of the nones come at the expense of the percentage of individuals who are strongly religious or has the growth of the nones drawn from the proportion of the population that was or would have been weakly religious? Also, what does the growth of the nones mean for the links between different dimensions of religiosity?

Nones and strength of identity

While the growth of the nones with regard to the primary religious affiliation question of the GSS is well known, there is another question asked in the GSS that nuances our understanding of this trend. This question asks individuals

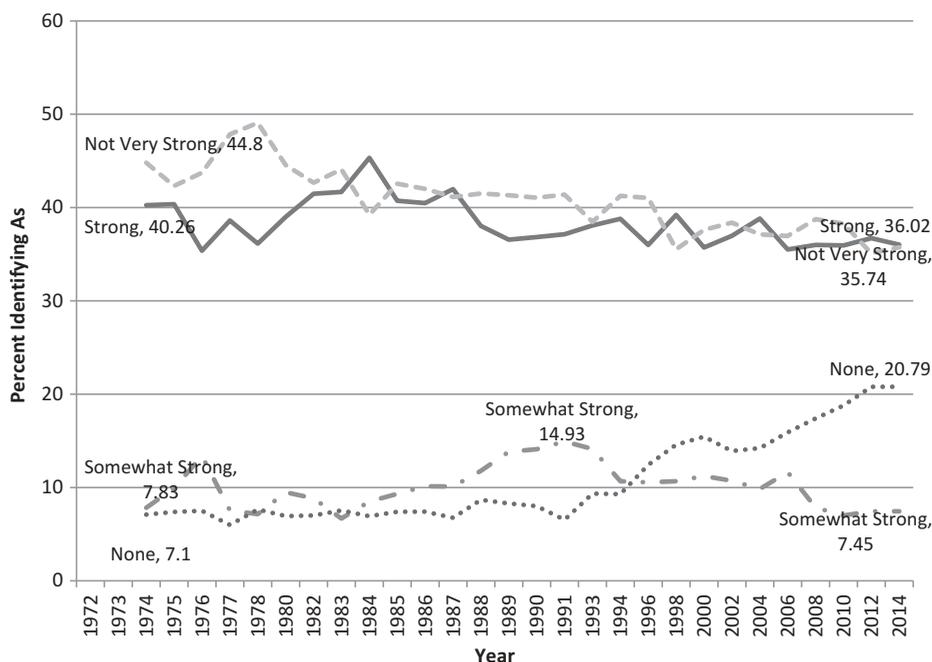


Figure 1. Trends in religious identification and strength of religious identification from 1974 to 2014 (General Social Surveys).

Data: General Social Survey, 1972–2014.

who name a religious preference whether they “[w]ould call yourself a strong [religious preference] or a not very strong [religious preference]?”⁵ The first time this question was asked in the GSS was in 1974. Individuals who say they are a none in response to the initial religious identity question are not asked the strength of identity question and are coded as having no religion (i.e. ‘none’). The responses to this question over time are shown in [Figure 1](#).

There are several aspects worth highlighting in this figure. Firstly, we see that, in 1974, about 45% of US adults said that they had a religious identity, but this identity was not very strong. This percentage began a slow and steady decline in the early 1980s and ended at 36% in 2014. The percentage of adults who strongly identified with a religion in 1974 was about 40%. This percentage declined slightly to 36% in 2014, although, if we compare it to the percentage of the late 1970s instead of the early 1970s, the percentage did actually not change at all. Thus, while the share of weakly identified individuals has shrunk, it is not as apparent that the share of strongly identified individuals has shrunk to the same extent.

We would be remiss not to highlight the increase in those saying they are ‘somewhat strong’ in their religious identity, beginning in the late 1980s and ending in the early 1990s. About 8% of individuals gave this response in 1974, which is about the same percentage giving that response in 2014.

However, beginning in roughly 1987, this response became more popular for several years, peaking at about 15% of respondents in 1993. This is even more intriguing, given that this is not a response which is explicitly offered in the GSS, but a response that is coded if volunteered by the respondent. At around the same time, there was a drop in the percentage of people identifying as strongly religious. To identify a possible explanation for this finding, we must look to the religious landscape at that time. During the 1970s and 1980s, evangelicals and the Christian Right grew in the United States. During this period, “from 1978 to 1988 [...] strong affiliation rose by about 10 percentage points in every birth cohort” (Voas and Chaves 2016, 1542). Because of this, from the late 1980s into the early 1990s, “many Americans were increasingly unhappy about the growing public presence of conservative Christians” (Putnam and Campbell 2010, 120). Many Americans came to view the mixing of religion and politics, and thus the Christian Right and evangelicals, unfavorably (Putnam and Campbell 2010). If Americans at that time associated strong religious identification with conservative Christians, non-conservative religious individuals might have been less likely to identify with that category (see Hout and Fischer 2002), while not being willing to identify as ‘not very strong’. In fact, due to their similarity, David Voas and Chaves (2016) combined ‘strong’ and ‘somewhat strong’, differentiating them from ‘not very strong’ and ‘no affiliation’. Of course, we can only speculate that this might have been the reason for the increase in the voluntary response of ‘somewhat strong’ during this period.

In terms of the rise of the nones, however, it appears that this trend has drawn more from the decline of the ‘not very strong’ category than the ‘strong’ category. Indeed, the 10 percentage points lost in the ‘not very strong’ category would offset about three-fourths of the gains in the none category, while the losses in the ‘strong’ category would offset the other one-fourth. In sum, the growth of the nones appears to have come primarily, but not exclusively, from the decline of individuals who were or might have previously been weakly connected to religion.

The changing relationships between identity, belief, and behavior

To be clear, we are not the first to suggest that the growth of the nones has primarily resulted from individuals who were or might have been weakly connected to religion in the first place. In his analysis of religious identification and belief in God by birth cohort, Sherkat (2014, 109) found that, among earlier birth cohorts, there was a higher percentage of individuals identifying with a religion, even though they stated that they did not believe in God compared to more recent cohorts. From this he concludes that “in the earlier generations, people who do not believe were forced by social pressures to nonetheless identify with some religious group”. Such individuals would

have been those stating that they were weakly connected to their religion and this is the population from which the nones have grown.

Religious identification is, however, only one dimension of an individual's religiosity, which consists of other dimensions like religious behavior and belief. How has the growth of the nones affected the empirical relationships between religious identity, religious belief, and religious behavior? The trends seen in Figure 1 suggest that much of the growth of the nones has come from the category of individuals who weakly identified with a religion. We might assume that such individuals would likely have also been weak on the religious behaviors and beliefs measures. Has the removal of individuals who are weak believers or participators from the category of identifiers strengthened the predictive power of religious identity?

Figure 2 shows the trend in the correlations between identifying with a religion and religious service attendance,⁶ between identifying and view on the veracity of the Bible, and between identifying and prayer frequency. Identifying with a religion is measured dichotomously, with 1 representing the responses of Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Other and 0 representing the none response. The view of the Bible measure comes from a question asking respondents, "Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible?" Responses are coded as 1) "The Bible is an

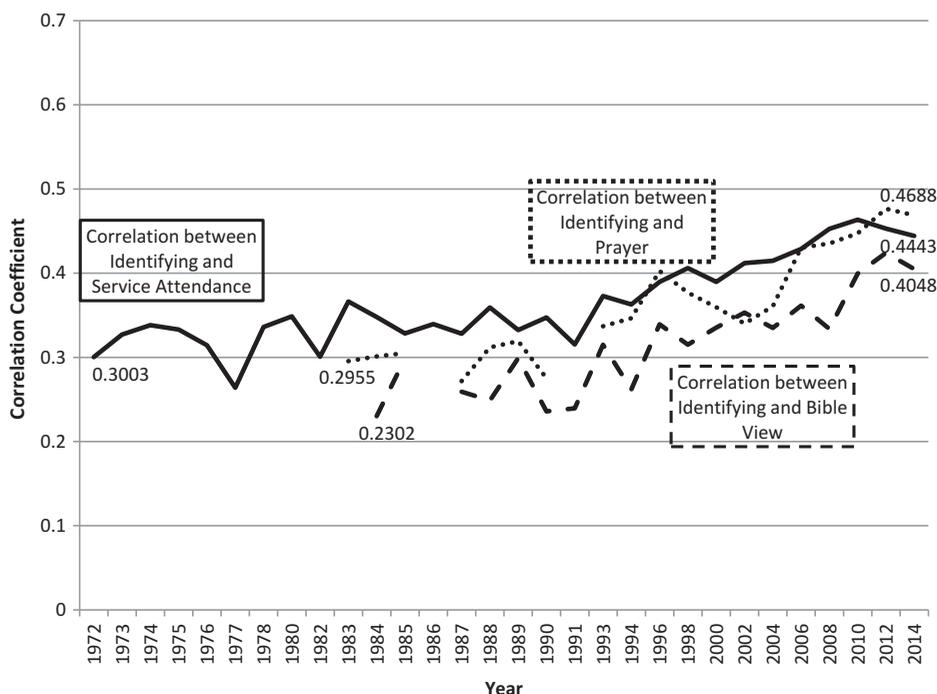


Figure 2. Trends in the correlation between religious identification and three measures of religious belief and behavior.

Data: General Social Survey, 1972–2014.

ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men”, 2) “The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word”, and 3) “The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word”. The prayer frequency question asks respondents, “About how often do you pray?” Six responses are offered, ranging from 1) “never” to 6) “several times a day”. The religious service attendance question asks, “How often do you attend religious services?” Nine responses are offered, ranging from 1) “never” to 9) “several times a week”.

We see firstly that the correlation between identifying with a religion and religious service attendance has increased from 0.30 in 1972 to 0.44 in 2014. The growth in this correlation began to increase in the early 1990s. As we already know from [Figure 1](#), this is the same time that the growth of the nones began. A similar trend is seen for the correlation between identifying with a religion and view on the Bible, which is shown in the dashed line. Our ability to examine this trend is more limited because the Bible question has not been asked in every edition of the GSS and not always in the same ballot as the other religion questions. Still, we see that, in the mid-1980s, the correlation between identifying with a religion and Bible view was 0.23. This correlation began to increase in the 1990s and ended at 0.40 in 2014. Finally, the trend for the correlation between identifying and frequency of prayer appears to be similar. The first observed correlation is 0.29, while the last correlation in 2014 was 0.44. In sum, identifying with a religion has become more strongly tied to religious behavior and belief.

Quadrants of identity, belief, and behavior

We can better understand this trend by deconstructing the correlations. Let us remember that a correlation is computed by dividing the covariance between two variables by the product of the standard deviations of those two variables:

$$r = \frac{[\text{covariance}(X, Y)]}{[\text{s.d.}(X)][\text{s.d.}(Y)]}$$

This means that the increasing correlations between identity and other measures of religious belief and practice could be the result of two forces. Firstly, the covariance between identity and those other measures could be increasing, thereby increasing the numerator. Alternatively, the increasing correlation could be the result of the decreasing variation in identity and those other measures, which would decrease the denominator. Of course, some combination of these factors could be in play.

Considering the variation issue first, we know that the rise of the nones will have increased the variation of the identity measure, as it was previously a very unbalanced distribution, with most people identifying, and is now increasingly spread out as more people do not identify. Indeed, as seen in Figure 3, the standard deviation of identity has increased right alongside the rise of the nones, from about 0.25 in the 1980s to 0.40 in 2014.

Figure 3 also shows the trend in the standard deviation of religious service attendance. This does not appear to change nearly as much over time, although the trend suggests a very slight increase in the last several observations. Regardless, an increase in the standard deviation of the identity measure, along with a stable or slightly increasing standard deviation in religious service attendance, would actually reduce the correlation between the two measures as they would increase the denominator in the correlation equation. The only way that this would produce the trend of an increasing correlation would be by increasing the numerator—the covariance between identity and religious service attendance.

The covariance is itself, generally speaking, a measure of the extent to which cases tend to be on the same side of the mean for each of the two variables. Figure 4 represents this dynamic when the covariance between religious identity and religious attendance is considered. When variables covary, cases tend to be in the diagonal quadrants, depending on whether the covariance is positive or negative in nature. There is an observed positive

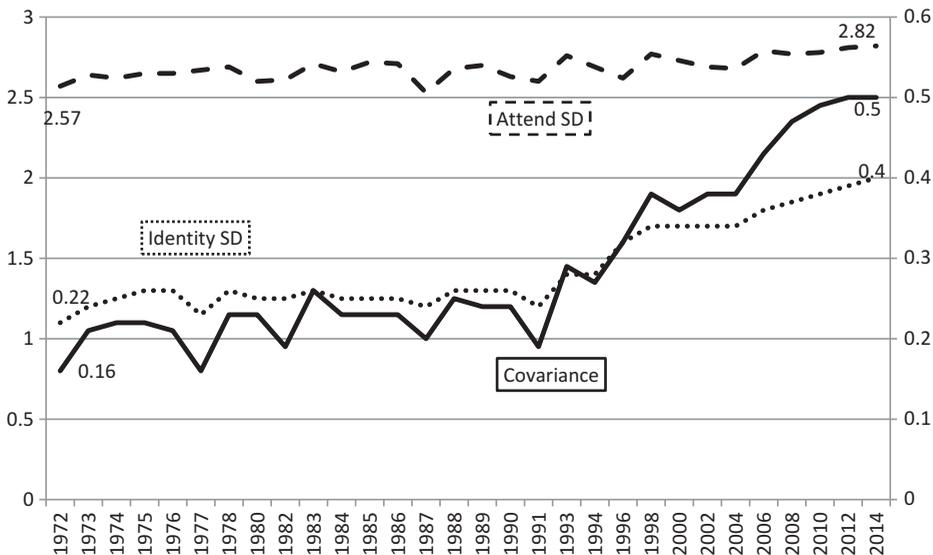


Figure 3. Trends in variance and covariance of identity and attendance.

Data: General Social Survey, 1972–2014.

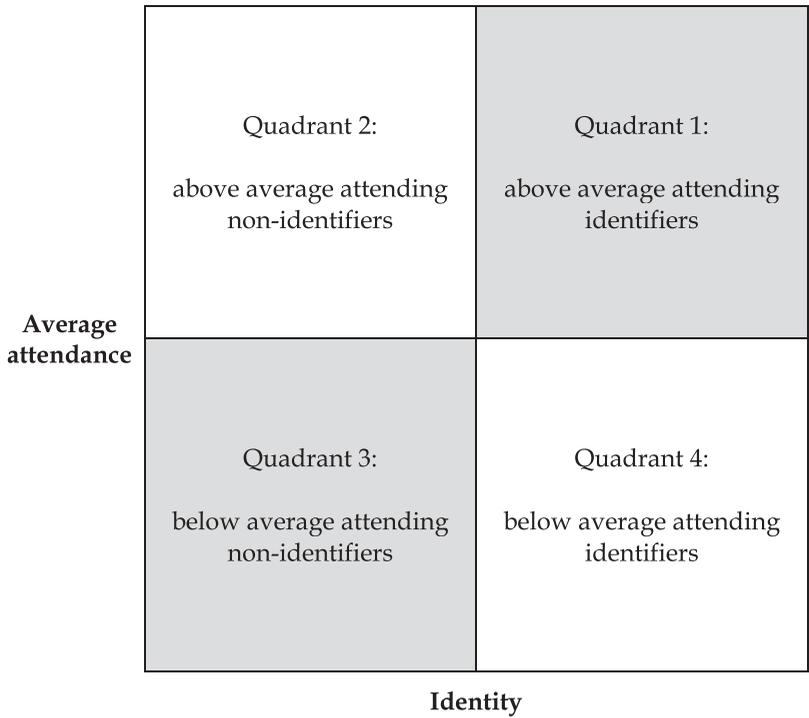


Figure 4. Conceptualization of covariance between identity and attendance.

covariance between having a religious identity and attending religious services, which means that more individuals tend to be found in quadrant 3 (below average attending non-identifiers) and quadrant 1 (above average attending identifiers) than in quadrant 2 (above average attending non-identifiers) and quadrant 4 (below average attending identifiers).

How has this covariance changed over time? [Figure 3](#) shows that the covariance between the two measures has increased alongside the rise in nones. To be clear, this is not a statistical necessity. The rise of the nones could result from individuals moving from quadrant 2 (above average attenders who identify) to quadrant 1 (above average attending nones) without increasing the covariance between identity and attendance. This might result from individuals disavowing the religious identity labels offered in surveys, but not religious practices or beliefs. Such a move would actually decrease the covariance by placing individuals in discordant positions in the identity–attendance relationship. Similarly, the rise of the nones could be produced by individuals moving from quadrant 2 (above average attending identifiers) to quadrant 4 (below average attending nones). Such a move would be broadly offsetting in terms of the covariance as these individuals would still be in the same concordant diagonal. The reason the covariance is increasing, however, is

because the rise of the nones has resulted in individuals who were previously in discordant quadrants moving into concordant ones.

We can actually calculate the percentage of individuals in these respective quadrants at the start and at the end of the observation period. These percentages are shown in Figure 5. In 1972, 50.05% of the population were above average attending identifiers (quadrant 1), 0.13% of the population were above average attending non-identifiers (quadrant 2), 4.82% were below average attending non-identifiers (quadrant 3), and 45.02% were below average attending identifiers (quadrant 4). The sum of positive diagonal quadrants was slightly greater than the negative diagonal quadrants (54.85% to 45.15%), which leads to a positive covariance. By 2014, however, the gap between the sums of the positive diagonal quadrants and negative diagonal quadrants increased (61.33% to 38.6%), which leads to the

Quadrant 2: above average attending non-identifiers 0.13%	Quadrant 1: above average attending identifiers 50.03%	1972 Total in Q1 & Q3: 54.85% Total in Q2 & Q4: 45.15% Difference: 9.7%
Quadrant 3: below average attending non-identifiers 4.82%	Quadrant 4: below average attending identifiers 45.02%	

Quadrant 2: above average attending non-identifiers 1.23%	Quadrant 1: above average attending identifiers 41.85%	2014 Total in Q1 & Q3: 61.33% Total in Q2 & Q4: 38.67% Difference: 22.66%
Quadrant 3: below average attending non-identifiers 19.48%	Quadrant 4: below average attending identifiers 37.44%	

Figure 5. Population shares of identity-attendance covariance quadrants in 1972 and 2014.

larger covariance. This increased gap is mainly due to the growth of quadrant 3, which increased from the 4.82% in 1972 to 19.48% in 2014.

Where did this growth come from? We see that both quadrant 1 and quadrant 4 decreased between 1972 and 2014, so the lost percentage points had to go somewhere; quadrant 3 is the only quadrant with a substantial increase. Clearly, we cannot precisely detail shifts between these quadrants due to the data being cross-sectional. Thus, we only have snapshots of the quadrants over time. Changes in the quadrant percentages may be due to individuals shifting between them or to individuals in one quadrant dying and new cohorts entering into other quadrants. It is possible that the growth in quadrant 3 came entirely from quadrant 4, while movement from quadrant 1 to quadrant 4 offset some of this. It is also possible that the growth in quadrant 3 came partially from quadrant 1 and partially from quadrant 4. Given that [Figure 1](#) showed more of a decline in weakly identified individuals than strongly identified individuals, it would seem more likely that much of the movement was from quadrant 4 to quadrant 3, while some of the movement may have been from quadrant 1 to quadrant 4. This type of movement would represent the religious (quadrant 1) to fuzzy (quadrant 4) to secular (quadrant 3) cohort dynamic identified by Voas (2009).

Of course, the boundaries marking these quadrants are defined by the mean attendance and mean identification for each year. We know that mean identification dropped with the rise of the nones. The mean level of attendance also declined from 4.34 in 1972 to 3.33 in 2014. While some of this is due to a decline in attendance across all identification categories—strongly identified dropped by 0.52, somewhat strong by 0.41, and not very strong by 0.49 from 1974 to 2014, it is primarily due to the increase in the nones who have much lower average attendance (0.88 in 2014) compared to the other identification categories (in 2014, strongly identify = 5.52, somewhat strong = 3.90, not very strong = 2.42). Regardless of this, for our interests here, the end result is a larger share of individuals in the positive diagonal in 2014 compared to 1972, which produces the stronger correlations between identity and the other measures shown in [Figure 2](#).

Conclusion

The findings of this research note show that religious identity has become more tightly connected to religious behavior and belief, indicating that religious incongruence has declined over time in the United States. The increase in religious congruence parallels the growth in individuals identifying as religious nones. This may be because fewer non-believers feel the need “to falsify their preferences” due to social pressure (Sherkat 2014, 95). While religious congruence has strengthened over time, the correlations between religious belief, identity, and behavior are not perfect; religious incongruence

still exists, although it may continue to decline with the growth of religious nones. Future research would benefit from continuing to identify the contexts in which we should expect more or less religious congruence.

Notes

1. Of course, this may not be the case if such social pressure extends to religious practices, as an individual would feel pressure to identify and, say, attend religious services. We are focused here, however, on the assumption that the social pressure extended primarily or most strongly on identity and less so on expressed beliefs or practices.
2. Conducted annually or biennially since 1972 by the National Opinion Research Center and funded primarily by grants from the National Science Foundation, the General Social Survey is seen by many as the single best source for attitudinal trend data covering the United States (General Social Survey 2016). These data are publicly available at www.gss.norc.org and in a number of online data archives, such as the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (www.icpsr.umich.edu). More details regarding the history and design of the General Social Survey can be found at <http://gss.norc.org/Get-Documentation>.
3. The 95% confidence interval for this percentage is 16.10% to 20.02%.
4. The 95% confidence interval for this percentage is 11.30% to 15.38%.
5. This is the RELITEN variable in the GSS codebook.
6. Regarding the question how the consistent over-reporting of religious service attendance affects these correlations (e.g. Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves 1993). To the extent that this over-reporting is consistent over time, this would not actually affect the correlations. As Roger Finke, Christopher Bader, and Edward Polson note (2010, 3), “Constant error introduces little or no bias into the relationship between variables and the strength of relationships remain the same.”

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have no financial interest or benefit related to this research.

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