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Announcer: The Art of Leadership Network.

Ryan Burge: So my understanding of what non-religion is is changing pretty significantly in the last couple of years and really what I'm zeroing in on especially in the last year or two. I wrote a post for my subset called religion as a luxury good. Which went viral quote unquote whatever that means not like millions of clicks, but you know a lot of clicks for me. And so I make this argument that religion has become part and parcel of people who have done everything right quote on quote and what I mean by that is college education, middle-class income, married with children.

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If you check those four boxes, also called the Golden path, that's what a lot of conservatives like economists call that the golden path. If you make if you meet those criteria your chances of having good income, you know good outcomes as much higher you're much more likely to go to church. This is what people don't understand is like the more education you have the more likely you are to go to church the more the ideal combination of income and education are college degree, four year college degree, makes between 60 and 100 thousand dollars a year. So for me, what we're seeing, to me, is the Haves and the Have Nots are growing larger and larger every year. I think this is a serious problem both pastorally but also from a social science perspective.

Carey Nieuwhof: Welcome to the Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast it's Carey here and I hope our time together today helps you thrive in life and leadership. We are on episode 3 of our 2024 Church Trends series. You can download the free Team Guide at the link in the description. And we got a couple more coming up on that one as well. Today's episode is brought to you by Westfall Gold and by AI Copilot.Church. What if generosity was part of the DNA of your church? Learn more at advance.westfallgold.com or click the link in the description of this episode and check out AI Copilot. If you're ready to dive into AI but not sure how to get started, visit AICopilot.Church or click on the link in the description of this episode. Well, today my guest is Ryan Burge, and we are going to talk about the rise of the Nones, Christianity, is it becoming a luxury good, the threat to democracy with the decline in religion, and why the Nones, which you've heard a lot about, are actually very reachable people.

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So as I said, this is part three of our Church Trends series, something new we're doing on this podcast to get 2024 kicked off and I wanted to talk to Ryan because I discovered his substack and also a couple of books he co-authored and thought this guy is just brilliant. He is an associate professor of political science at Eastern Illinois University. And also a pastor in the American Baptist Church. He's written four books about religion and politics in the United States and well we get into the weeds on this one. I think you're really really going to enjoy it. And if you want to check out the rest of the series you can go back a couple episodes and stay tuned because we've got one or two more coming your way as well. And of course, we got a leader guide you can just click the link in the description to download that for you and your team. So question for you. What if generosity was a part of the DNA of your church? Well, I have partnered with Westfall Gold and leaders like Craig Groeschel and Chris Hodges to create Advance.

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It's a masterclass video series to help pastors and church leaders grow the courage and the skills to unleash generosity. In this masterclass you're going to discover how to cast a compelling vision that invites investment, how to make generosity part of the DNA of your church, and how to leverage existing technologies to connect with your givers. I do that section of the course. It's a pretty cool course. So check it out. You can learn more at [Advanced dot westfall.com](https://advanced.westfall.com) or simply click the link in the description of this episode. That's [Advanced dot Westfall gold.com](https://advanced.westfallgold.com) and then my guess is some of you are thinking about trying out AI finally in 2024. Here's the reality. You tried it a little bit before and you're like, yeah, I don't get it or didn't produce what I wanted. Or maybe you're like, yeah, I'm not really sure.

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Well, I am very excited to announce that my team in connection with the team at church.tech are launching something brand new called AICopilot.Church. You can access free AI powered tools for content creation, decision making, and marketing with AICopilot.Church. Things like a catchy email subject line generator, which you can also try for blog posts and articles and other marketing and expense versus investment advisor. In other words, if you have to make a proposal to your board, how do you make the best argument? Well, AI can do that for you. It's so simple to use. Check it out at AICopilot.Church.

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And yeah, there are some other resources that you can access as well where we get into the ethical and Theological questions about AI blog posts that will help you

navigate that world. We'll be adding new prompts and improving the site regularly, but in the meantime, you can get started today for free by going to aicopilot.church or simply click the link in the description. Well excited for this deep dive. Here we go, my conversation with political scientist and Pastor Ryan Burge.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Well Ryan, I'm really glad to have you on the podcast, welcome.

RYAN BURGE: Thanks so much for having me. Really appreciate it.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Yeah, so I'd love to start with a bit of background about how you got interested in research and how you found your your current calling or I don't know. Maybe I'd call it an obsession.

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RYAN BURGE: That's great. I love it man. That's why you're here. Oh, man. I don't even it's a long strange trip for me. To be honest with you. I don't really know how I every step is logical from the prior step. But from like the first step to 30 the step is not logical at all in in a weird way. I started out undergrad didn't know what I was gonna do history major kind of fiddling around was a youth pastor.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Were you history and political science?

RYAN BURGE: That's my undergrad, history political science. Double major.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Yeah, come on, there you go.

RYAN BURGE: But yeah, I agree a functionally useless 100% right? You know, it helped me a bunch of political science though because like, you know, like a lot of what we do is contemporary. But like I said, well what it's like the election of 1868 and you're like, oh I know about that.

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Yeah. So I didn't really know what I was going to do. I was a youth pastor intern in undergrad. I grew up in an evangelical church and I really took the gig because I needed a job to be completely blunt. It was a three-month internship, you know, just like, like let's just get the kids through summer. Let's try something out. And then three months turned into three years as a youth pastor in a little church in Centralia, Illinois. And then when I went to grad school, I switched to being a senior pastor of a little church in Marion, Illinois, called Warder Street Baptist Church, which actually doesn't even exist anymore.

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It closed down a couple of years ago. And I tried to get away from ministry, to be honest with you.

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CAREY NIEUWHOF: Not alone in that.

RYAN BURGE: Yeah. Like it kept, it's like, it's, it's Calvin's irresistible grace, right? Like drawing me in.

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Um, and so I got an assistantship which is like a job as a grad student to work on campus, and then another church called me said well you preach once and I said, yes, we preach next Sunday. I said, yes and then all of a sudden I've been there for 17 years now. Um, so yeah, I I don't really know how all this happened but you know the data thing really happened in the last five or six years. I was really trying to be something different and learn something different and and bring something to the conversation that other people weren't and I realized there was a real dearth of academics in the religion space that were riding for the general public. There were more riding for their own people, which is fine. That's just not my bag.

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So I started making graphs putting on Twitter. I'm I loved I loved with a past tense Twitter what it was not what it is. Now that got my start tweets and graphs out. They went viral and all of a sudden one thing led to another and more followers and more opportunities and next thing I know I'm sitting in a room with Anderson Cooper and you know, I've been on the front page of Reddit with 70,000 upvotes and life took a weird turn and I keep making graphs and keep people keep wanting to read them. So here's where here's where we are.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: That's fantastic. Yeah, I mean, I just covered you far more recently in terms of your substack, right? Which means it's very recent because you haven't even been on a year.

RYAN BURGE: Yes in April. I mean, I I wanted to get off of Twitter on sleep because I really don't like what Elon has done with the plot form and and I saw I wanted to control my own destiny anymore and substack is a great way emails are the greatest way to communicate with people. That's what I've realized.

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Like social media, you're at the whims of the corporate leadership, whether it be Meta or Twitter, whatever it is, they tweak the algorithm and your reach goes away.

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Email never goes away.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Or today, you need to be verified. By the way, that's only X number of dollars a month.

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RYAN BURGE: And with Substack, it's all email. So if I move to another platform, I take my email list with me to the other platform and I own that no matter what happens. And no matter how many times you try to kill email, you can't kill email. It will always exist.

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CAREY NIEUWHOF: It's the cockroach of the digital world, right? You know, you and I are both email evangelists. I was just on a webinar with my academy members, Art of Leadership Academy. I'm like, hey, I went to the top 10 church websites in America, just like in my own head. These are like really big churches with millions of dollars. None of them have an email opt-in on their homepage. I'm like...

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Yeah, exactly. Exactly. I'm like, this is the lowest hanging fruit out there and listen, a lot of them are my friends all that stuff, but it's like yeah email. Nobody likes it and everybody uses it so I get it 100%.

RYAN BURGE: I mean people like I've never seen you before and they're like, but I get your email every day and I'm like, wow, you're not on Twitter. You're not on Facebook. You haven't seen me on this, that, no, I just see you on substack doing my email. Okay, I mean whatever whatever it takes to get my work to you. I am more than willing to do that.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: That's cool. So in substack, I mean, I'm a novice here you own the email list.

RYAN BURGE: Yeah, and I can easily export it. If I move to a new service just hit export and it just drops it in like an Excel file. I have a paid option and a free option. They take substack takes 10% of what you generate Revenue wise and then stripe takes like three percent on top of that.

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But it drops right into your account. Now, everyone has a different approach to this, you know, some people are all free and then you can just like a donation for the paid tier for me. I settled on Monday free Thursday paid but I actually show you half of the paid post for free on Thursday. So everyone gets it they only get to read half of it no matter what tier you're in and then after three months, every post goes into the archive after it's been live for three months. So if it was free, then it becomes paid after three months in the archives.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Oh interesting and are you finding like, you know, I've done minimal research into this but what I've seen about 10% of subscribers go pay.

RYAN BURGE: That's yeah. So I think the rains they give you between five and ten percent and I'm right in the middle of that range and so it's been good. I mean, growing the free list is good because it just gets more exposure to you. And then my conversion rate's actually gone up slowly over time and it's turned into like a legitimate side hustle in terms of revenue and readership and it's becoming more established. You know, like my academic friends get mad at me, like, why would you put some of your work behind a paywall? I go, you publish in academic journals all the time that are behind paywalls.

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And you don't make any money off of that.

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Like, the journal editor makes all the money off that. You make nothing. So why not me do that on my own and make my own revenue stream off the things that I create? Academics are not, we're not trained to think that way. We're trained to think like you get a salary and then you give everything else away.

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I don't think that's the model going forward for most of us because what we do at least what I understand what I do creates value for people and that value is attached to monetary compensation. So just get over the awkwardness of it and say if you think this is worth it, it's five bucks a month 50 bucks a year. You get all this content 100 posts a year 600 graphs, you know, whatever it's going to be that's all available to you if you pay.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: How do you determine because we do have a lot of entrepreneurial leaders listening who have side hustles. How do you determine what goes out there for free and what you put behind the paywall?

RYAN BURGE: That is the hardest thing so I know here's where I've landed on that the stuff that's really poppy like that will like hit the widest audience goes on the Monday free right? So if I'm talking about like the like a post about evangelicalism as a political identity, like that's a Monday post because it's really poppy and like the New York Times wants to talk about that and I know they're really tuned into that now Thursday post like I have a post ring this Thursday where I try to estimate the number of people in the pews and like the 10 largest Protestant denominations in America. That is not as poppy. But for a certain segment of my readership, I know they really want to know those numbers like that for their own personal knowledge or edification or whatever it is. So that's a Thursday because it's kind of more in the weeds. It's more denominational. So usually my Thursday posts are more targeted towards a religious demographic in my Monday post or more for like a broad demographic.

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CAREY NIEUWHOF: Wow. Okay, that's super helpful. We want to dive into the weeds today and I want to talk about methodology first because it seems to me, I don't know, maybe I'm just like, this is a perception issue and it's not actually reality, but everybody seems to be running surveys these days and you know, all that stuff. So you've got some training in this. And we've just had, like by the time this airs, we all have just had an episode with David Kinnaman, good friend for many years, you know, Barna, polling, scientific samples, the whole deal. What makes for reliable, bankable data in your view?

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RYAN BURGE: That's a great question. One hallmark is it being publicly available definitely gives you a feeling of more authenticity because it means someone can come in behind you and check your work to make sure it makes sense and then compare your data with other data sets to see if the variables sort of shake out in a similar way.

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Right, we call that replicability. So, you know, if you're willing to show me that your data is replicable then in my mind the authenticity of it and the validity of it go up dramatically because now it's not, I'd actually do that in a post last week. I compared

data. I usually use called The Cooperative Election Study against Pew data, which is considered like the gold standard in what we do to show you where my data is different than theirs and why I think it's different than theirs and it is a little bit and I'm just clear about that like there are differences. I can't really figure out why but here they are so transparency and openness. You also got to think what's the purpose of this survey? Because sometimes what PR firms do now is run surveys to like use as a hook for PR pieces. Those are almost totally that's why I'm asking the question. Those are almost never scientifically valid.

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Um, if it's done by an academic, there's a really good chance they're drawing their very best to make it academically rigorous. So for instance the great detergent, which I think we're going to talk about a little bit. I mean those surveys we spent a lot of money with a very reputable survey firm called qualtrics to make them as good as they possibly, this is not like a Google form or a Survey Monkey, you know where we just kind of blast it out to random people.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: I asked yeah, I asked put a, you know, Instagram poll up and you know survey says exactly.

RYAN BURGE: Those are great. Like you can write great blog posts about those but those are not scientifically rigorous and so almost all the data I use is open source A and B has been published in academic journals that same kind of data sets been published.

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So, that, I use really the same data that academics use almost all the time, and that to me is the gold standard is would this land in a peer -reviewed journal or not, and a lot of the stuff that you see, especially in the Christian sphere, unfortunately, would not meet that criteria.

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CAREY NIEUWHOF: Hmm. So, your research strives to meet that criteria, could be used in a peer -reviewed journal.

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RYAN BURGE: So, like one weird niche that I'm in right now is Christians will come to me and want to do a survey, but want to have that higher level of authenticity than they've seen in other work. And so, like I've become like the stamp, which I take really seriously, by the way, like the work I've...

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CAREY NIEUWHOF: Your name is your brand, right? Exactly. And trust, and your trust.

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RYAN BURGE: Exactly, right like that's how the great detergent. That's how my name got on it. Actually initially. I wasn't supposed to do on the cover of the book, but then we realized wow you're doing a lot of work for this and it will increase the veracity of the book but also will increase my profile. So it's like a win-win for both sides. So I'm working with a lot of different organizations right now how to build surveys in a more academically rigorous way that will actually get play outside the Christian Evangelical ecosystem.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: And this is still a side hustle for you. Like this is your hobby.

RYAN BURGE: Yeah, I've got I've got like four jobs at this point

CAREY NIEUWHOF: You are a very busy guy.

RYAN BURGE: I try to be I mean if I get if I get bored that things happen like, you know, like mental health wise I need to be busy like vacations are hard for me. I am a workaholic. I'm a self-identified workaholic but I read something really interesting says, you know work Halls are always it's always seen as a negative thing. But if you love what you do and it gives you life and gives you purpose.

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And you still are balancing other things in your life then work as much as you can or much as you want to and that's kind of where I'm at in my life right now.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: You know, that's an interesting tweak on the definition, you know, because if it's not harming the people closest to you, my work all of them was harming the people closest to me my wife my kids people around my team. So I found you know, I'm a recovering workaholic but I think you're right. Like, you know, I argue there's no such thing as a balanced life just a passionate one, and my passions have gone in different directions over the last few years. But like yeah, this is a work of passion and my problem is I could still not shut the laptop. Although I'm getting better at it. I'm getting better at it.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Here's what I think, academic wise. There's a window for us where we're the most productive and it's not that big it's like five to seven years.

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And so, like, I need to blow it out while I still feel like I want to do that because at some point, I'm going to turn down a little bit. So produce as much as I can in this window of my life and then slow down as I get older. And right now, it's full speed ahead.

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CAREY NIEUWHOF: That's interesting. How old are you? 41. Yeah. Yeah. It's that prime season, right?

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RYAN BURGE: Academics, we peak late, Carey. Like, we're not 22, you know, like, honestly, between like 35 and 45 is when academics are their most productive. We know that. So I really want to keep my foot on the gas for as long as I can through my 40s. And then in my 50s, I'll probably cruise a little bit and write on my name a little bit and probably produce less stuff, but maybe, you know, more meaningful stuff to me. I don't know. But in this season, I'm not bored of this. And that's a blessing to me. One day I will be, but it's not today.

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CAREY NIEUWHOF: It's a great conversation. Are you familiar with the work of Arthur Brooks?

RYAN BURGE: Absolutely. Yeah his speech the National Prayer Breakfast. I love that a couple years ago.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: So Strength to Strength. You're just moving into your Peak years and all of this data that you're producing will move to crystallized intelligence rather than fluid intelligence. We had them on last year along with Jim Davis, by the way, that's what I love about having a knot at the same time, but two separate episodes Jim Davis and Arthur Brooks. And so you guys can scroll through the archive and find those conversations. All right, but I want to get to the Nones. So your book The Nones first edition second edition is out now came out a few years ago. What was true then and then why the need first of all describe what the Nones are give us a framework for it. I think a lot of people will have heard about it. But then I want to know why the second edition.

RYAN BURGE: Yes, so Nones and no NES got to spell it every time he needed on my forehead.

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It's not the little catholic ladies who teach school. It's it's non-religious people. So the way we define it is three categories atheists agnostic or nothing in particular and we get that literally from the survey responses. That's you get what your present religion of any you get a bunch of options Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, Mormon,, Buddhist last three are atheist, agnostic, nothing in particular, you pick one of those three boxes and we put you in the category of None. By the way. I did not coin the word. None is existed since at least 1968. I just saw a reference to it today when I was doing some research, so it's been around for over 50 years. I just kind of put it on the cover of a book and made it front and center in American Life first book came out two years. It came out 2000. Oh 2021 and then you know what that data only went to 2018. So there's two or three more years of age. I could add to that and the pandemic happened.

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And my editor was like, don't you want to write about like what the pandemic did for American religion? Good, bad, and indifferent? And I was like, yeah, I really do.

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I don't want to write a whole book about that because I just don't think there's enough there yet. So I added a chapter just about the pandemic to the end of the Nones. I updated every graph in the Nones. So in a lot of sections, there's like two graphs. Now there's four graphs. So after you talk about something like I did, you know, 75 podcasts and interviews and talks, you think about it in a different way and the questions come at you and it kind of turns the way you understand certain topics. I thought, I want to, I'm evolving in how I think about this, the Nones, and I want you all to evolve with me. I want to show you more of what I'm seeing in the data now and understanding more about non-religious people. And so the second edition was just more, more, more of what the first edition was. I think it's actually a better volume because it's just more data analysis, more thoughtful analysis, and I think it's a more in-depth analysis of the Nones.

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CAREY NIEUWHOF: Yeah, so what was the big headline with the Nones? And then how has it evolved over the last couple years?

RYAN BURGE: Yeah, so it started with a tweet Carey like all good things start with in 2019. I had like 600 Twitter followers. I tweeted out a graph that was about the American religious landscape a new the GSS General Social Survey just came out

new edition and I just ran the basic rail tread graph as well. It's called put it online. And this is only gonna do like 140 characters. So it was like big news the Nones are now bigger than any other religious group or whatever it was. And that just took off and never stopped like in the first 10 minutes like 25 retweets. I got five retweets and I was jumping up and down in those days. So like that was huge and then next morning was like 300, the next day it was like 500, the next day it was a thousand it just kept going and going and like it would stop for a while then Sam Harris the famous atheist would retweet it. And there we go again and the New York Times called The Washington Post call the times London called like I just talking to I never talked to the media before.

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And now I'm talking to them three times a day. So that is why I wrote the book because I knew that people really cared about this stuff. I went you know, Wayne Gretzky says don't skate where the puck is, skate where the puck's going, and that's where it's going. Like I just saw all the interest going in that direction. I thought I have the tools to answer those questions in a fun interesting engaging accessible way. So let's write the book and from that point forward, God bless the Nones. They keep rising, which means I keep having a job, you know, they're they're amongst Generations Z now at least 40% of Generation Z or non-religious, but it's rising on every age group. It's not just a younger people. It's older people too. It's not just white. It's it's people of color. It's it's not just Democrats, it's Republicans. I mean, I really do think it's the most important cultural shift in America in the last 50 years and not many people are riding about it in a compelling accessible interesting way.

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CAREY NIEUWHOF: Yeah, your writing is, for those who may not be familiar with your book or with your online writing, very accessible. I mean, it's academic data, but like it's a fun read. You can tell that you're an excellent writer. You make it, you don't dilute it, but you make it very accessible, which is something I really appreciate. That's why I linked to you a fair bit in some of the work that I do. How is the story evolving, even in the last, like since that first 2019 finding to addition one to addition two? What are you seeing?

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RYAN BURGE: So my understanding of what non-religion is, is changing pretty significantly in the last couple years.

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And really what I'm zeroing in on especially in the last year or two, I wrote a post for my subset called religion as a luxury good. Which went viral, quote unquote, whatever that means like not like millions of clicks, but you know a lot of clicks for me. And so I make this argument that religion has become part and parcel of people who have done everything right, quote-unquote,, and what I mean by that is college education, middle-class income, married with children. If you check those four boxes called the Golden path, that's what a lot of conservative like Economist call that the golden path. If you met if you meet those criteria your chance of having good income, you know good outcomes as much higher you're much more likely to go to church. This is what people don't understand is like the more education you have the more likely you are to go to church the more the ideal combination of income and education are college degree, four year college degree, making 60-100,000 dollars a year.

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So for me, what we're seeing, to me, is the Haves and the Have Nots are growing larger and larger every year. I think this is a serious problem both pastorally but also from a social science perspective because the nothing in particular is the fastest growing religious group in America today. There were 14% of America in 2008. They're 23% of America today. Amongst 18 to 22 year olds one third of them identify as nothing in particular. That's the plurality by the way. The most likely choice amongst college students today is nothing in particular on surveys. Now, here's what shocking about them, half of atheists have four-year college degrees. It's only 25% of nothing in particular.

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So, like, they're not...when we talk about, like, the Nones, we need to spend a lot more time talking about the nothing in particulars because educationally they're falling behind, income -wise they're falling behind. They don't trust other people. They don't engage in the political process. They're basically checking out of every aspect of American society while churches are now filled with everyone who did everything right.

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Good income, good education, kids, married, all those things that the nothing in particulars are not doing.

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So, I think we're seeing this terrible bifurcation, right, in American society of the haves and the have-nots. And for a lot of nothing in particulars, it's going to be harder and harder for them to move into the middle class or upper middle class because they don't have those social connections that church provides. And I think that is...that's how I'm thinking about this more and more is they're feeling left out, left behind, lost, cut off.

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And that is really bad pastorally spiritually but also economically and democratically Little D democratically for American society.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Yeah, I remember that article when I came across it on your feed and I linked to it in my weekly newsletter on Friday called On The Rise and like lots of people went crazy over that article. And first of all, great title Religion as Luxury Good like great got me, but you know, there was a lot of substance behind it. And and I think so many myths got broken down like this whole idea don't send Junior off the college. They're gonna be convert. They're gonna you know believe in evolution. It's that whole line that we've been fed for decades now, apparently is not true or not universally true.

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Yeah, explain that even, let's start there because I want to dissect you just shared a lot of information. I want to dissect it. So this whole idea that the uneducated the not very wealthy the non-successful people bail on church and that Ivy League probably all became Democratic progressives, you know, not true, not true. So let's start at that point.

RYAN BURGE: Yeah. So I think what the real like this all sits in the foundation of the concept of trust. A really simple concept but like so incredibly important for a functioning society is just the idea, can I trust another human being? Like that's how democracy works it's the glue that holds us together.

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If I can't trust another person, then I'm on alert all the time. I don't want to share, I don't want to pay taxes, I don't want to engage in the process.

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So it's not just interpersonal trust though, it's also institutional trust, which is like, do I trust banks? Do I trust media? Do I trust politicians? Do I trust the church? And what we're seeing more and more is that trust is very strongly related to education.

So the more education someone has, the more trusting they are of other people individually, called interpersonal trust, but also more trusting of institutions, because you got to think about institutions have served them well. They got a college degree, which allowed them to get a job at the big Fortune 500 company, which allows them to have a good income and feed their kids and have health insurance.

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So if you don't think this institution works, you're not going to get involved in that institution either. Everyone's out to get me everyone's, you know, looking for their own advantage in life. And I think people with education, now, it's hard to figure out causally what's going on here. Just getting educated make you more trusting or as being more trusting more likely for you to get educated, right? That's the causal difficulty of the whole thing. But the end result is the same which is that you've got a lot of high income high education trust will people and then you got a growing number of people who don't are just checking out from everything because all the pastors just trying to get more money to buy a jet, and the media is trying to feed me a narrative, and politicians are just trying to fatten their pockets, right? Everything is cynical and I think that is the overarching meta-narrative of the time that we live in is this cynicism and pessimism and distrustful of every institution and I think it's not just tearing the church apart, it's tearing every institution that we have in American society apart, and the problem is we don't have a direct line for how to rebuild trust in American institutions.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Yeah, and you know, I'm probably part of the system according to a lot of people three University degrees, you know, the whole deal generally a very trusting person. It's really interesting to think about you know, is it causal or is it correlative? It's a great question. I don't know obviously, you know, my experience is that but your argument which was so intriguing is the people who tend to still be around in the church as 2024 opens, are the people who aren't cynical of everything, who are better educated, who have higher incomes. Therefore, religion is a luxury good. And I think there's still a popular idea that the people who are a little more populist, a little more distrusting, they've prepared for the apocalypse with their storage of water and all the tablets they need and ammunition, etc. You're saying those people are deconverting faster than anybody.

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RYAN BURGE: They're checking out from every aspect of American society. And that is like, for instance, we ask questions, surveys, have you put up a political yard sign during this election cycle, which I think is a great question, by the way, because

it's like that is a really basic political thing. You know, they'll give you one for free you literally, you know, just stick it in your yard. Nothing in particular is almost none of them put a political yard sign in their yard atheists. This is fascinating atheist half of atheists gave to a candidate or campaign in 2020, half. You know what it was amongst white evangelicals 26%. Atheists are incredibly politically engaged. This is why I don't worry about them from like a social science perspective FYI because they're engaging they have good income. They have good education, they're engaging in politics and they're trying to change society in their own vision of what they think is, right.

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That is all good things from a social science perspective of political science perspective. That's exactly what we want in a functioning democracy. Nothing in particulars are saying you don't work for me. You don't represent me. You can't even see me. Goodbye. Like I am done with everything that you're involved with and that kind of disaffection and dissatisfaction and hopelessness is really caustic in a functioning society. And one thing we know especially about economic Mobility, right which is just the idea that can you move up in class from the lower class the middle class the middle class the upper class. The number one predictor of economic mobility is being in social networks with people who have like higher economic mobility than you do. They basically build the ladders for you to pull yourself up to the next rung of the economic spectrum. And one of the last generators of economic mobility. We know this there's a study published last year that looked at like forty two million Facebook accounts.

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The number one place where you find economic mobility is not school because that's based on neighborhood, which is how that goes. And neighborhoods are based on economics, and even your workplace is based on economics because blue collar people work with blue collar people, white collar people work with white collar people.

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The only place where you find true economic mobility and diversity is houses of worship. That's the only place.

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So by not going to church, the rungs that would get you to the next level of economic mobility, there are no rungs there because you are not allowing yourself to be in

places to get you to the next level. And that's terrible. You know, it's just terrible because they're in their own, I don't want to blame anyone for their own poverty. Like, don't hear me wrong, but like at some level, you got to find a way out. And church used to be a great way out for a lot of people who needed help. And now those people have no way to reach out for help because they're not part of anything anymore.

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CAREY NIEUWHOF: Well, we become so stratified right like we're just in our own little cocoon, our own Echo chamber online Etc. Ryan there's so many directions. I could go, let me start here. I'm hearing more and more secular voices particularly in the last 18 months to two years talk about hey, I'm not this what it sounds like I'm not religious. I don't believe in religion. I have nothing in particular. But my goodness are we missing the church like there is something that we have to reinvent as a culture because we can't do community. We can't do relationship. We can't do social compassionate Justice where we care for those who are less fortunate and there is no other place, you know, and when I think about diversity for a church, I've always said yes racial diversity very important, but nobody thinks about economic diversity like a lot of these Suburban churches, right? You gotta have a car to get there. Well does your church, and I think the ideal church has people on social assistance and millionaires, and you don't really know who's who but you're sitting next to each other and you're in the same community group and you're in the same serving team on that church, and you're right like where else does that exist? And social clubs are dying. I mean you look at you. Look at the Social Clubs of 50 years ago. They're not around anymore. They're not they're not like that. So yeah, talk a little bit more about the you know, people talk about the collapse of Western Civilization or the US Empire Etc. But I think part of that, what you're driving at, because I'm thinking, you know, it's sort of that Meme like how often do you think about the Roman Empire? I think about the decline of the Roman Empire quite a bit.

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Strangely, but you know, one of the marks of civilization is just that, it's civility. It is the idea that I'm going to treat people who are different than me with kindness and care. I had, it could be generational, maybe I'm just out of the loop on this, but I had two experiences in the last two weeks where I went up to order something at a fast food restaurant. And normally there's a protocol, right? The protocol is I walk up, you go, hi, how can I help you? Or, hey, how you doing today? Or, yeah, what can I get you? I just like to have the, they were younger, like teenagers, late teens, maybe

20, just looked down at the screen and waited and then like looked up at me and I'm like, oh, am I supposed to go?

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Is it my turn? Oh wait, it's my turn. Yeah. Is it my turn? Yeah. And then like not even a word.

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And I'm like, yeah, hi, how are you? And it's like, hmm.

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What is going on? I don't know talk about the collapse of the civil and civilization because I think you're right that distrust mistrust. That's a big.

RYAN BURGE: Let me tell you a story. I'm a pastor at heart. I'm a storyteller at heart. Um, I when I went to Greenville College, which is a free Methodist School liturgical I learned I grew up like low Church Evangelical Southern Baptist. So I had like learn about liturgy right? I went to Saint Paul's three Methodist Church in Greenville for church one Sunday morning, and they had this thing called prayers to the people which I think is great. I think more churches should do it.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: We used to do it back in the day.

RYAN BURGE: Yeah, like it's such a cool like so what happened for those of you who don't know don't grow up in this tradition the pastor basically starts with like a little short prayer about like pray for the country and pray for the denomination or the community or whatever and then he opens it up to the congregation and then most people say like a one or two sentence prayer like please pray for my aunt Kathy. She's got cancer and the pastor will say Lord in your mercy and we all say hear our prayer.

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It's a really nice like affirmation of the community and all kinds of cool stuff. Well, I was at church one Sunday and this guy walks in who's younger than me? And I was in college. So this guy had to be like 18 years old and his girlfriend or wife was with him and she had a baby on her hip. We're doing prayers to people and you know a typical stuff pray for Aunt Kathy, pray for me on traveling, you know, all the kind of stuff and write for was gonna close up. The guy in the back says, could you all pray for me? I lost my job and I don't know if I can afford the rent this month. Pastor says Lord in your mercy congregation says hear our prayer. Then we go on to the next

part of the service because that's how you do it in liturgical church after church was over one of the older gentleman the front went straight back to that guy in the back and said son. I own the lumber yard in town if you want a job. You can come work for me tomorrow.

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And I thought, that is what has been lost in American society over the last 20 or 30 years.

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Because if you speak in need into a group of people who have been trained, equipped, to help other people, they are going to move heaven and earth to help you.

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And we don't have spaces like that anymore in American society, where someone can speak in need into a group of people who are equipped and ready to help. And that is really the encapsulation of the problem that we're having now with income inequality, with political division that we have, the polarization that we're dealing with is we forgot the fact that other people are human beings that want to help us. They're not out to hurt us. And that young man, God bless his courage, right? To say that into a community of people. And then God bless that other man to step back and say, I don't know you, but I want to help you because this is what I've been trained to do over the course of my life.

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That is what we're missing. And that is why society is struggling like I don't lay in bed thinking about the decline of Roman Empire. I think by the decline of American society and I think that to me that's much much more pressing issue for us right now and specifically in my place I think about the role that religion used to play in American society and does not anymore and what we're missing because it's not there.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Yeah, I mean I could rant on but I think I need to ask another question. What else are you learning? Because this is very very close to my heart right now. And you're you're preaching to a converted audience. I would love to know more about the nothing in particulars and the Nones. What else do you think is relevant when we look at trends?

RYAN BURGE: Okay, here's here's an immediate question. Then the bigger question. I just asked media question rise of the Nones give us a time scale like this feels like the curve is going like this.

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So bad news and good news here. Between 1972 is the first good data. We have 5% of Americans were Nones in that very first general Social Survey in 1972 5%. This sociologist called the neglected category, which I think is hilarious because it's like they were but because they were like a rounding error there were 82 of them in that first General Social Survey 82 of them. Holy cow. Alright, here's what's fascinating between 1972 and 1991. It went from 5% to 7% So like really nothing substantial. You wouldn't feel that like from a societal standpoint. But then from 1991 forward, it was like boom like a hockey stick just straight up into the right and every year from that year from that point for it was like 1% every year or two one percent every year or two one percent every year or two. And now the best estimates are that 30% of American adults are Nones. Like I said, Gen Z, it's over 40% .

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Here's the good news though. I've seen several surveys recently that say that among the youngest adult Americans like 18 to 22 year old Americans, they're just as likely to be Nones as 25 year old Americans. Which means that the Nones are not continuing to rise above probably 43 to 45 percent So the hockey stick went up very dramatically and then it sort of was leveled off if not plateaued over the last couple years. So I think there's a hard ceiling at least right now in the data where the Nones are not getting, I don't think they're gonna get above 50 % in the next 20 or 30 years

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Well, that is good news. What happened in 1991 if that was the inflection point or do we know is it just like I don't know something the water?

RYAN BURGE: So I can give you a couple a couple guesses somewhat educated guesses one is one that people don't think about a lot which is the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War.

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You know, like the cold war was really a religious. It had like a ton of religious connotation to it because we only think about the politics now, we don't think about the fact like to be a communist was to be an atheist and to be an atheist was to be a communist. In America, "in God we trust" was put on the money, and under God was put on the pledge in the 1950s as a way to inoculate ourselves right against the Red

Scare and all that stuff. So communism goes away and now you can be an atheist and not be a communist.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: I have never heard that and that is really interesting. Okay, that's the theory,

RYAN BURGE: Right? Where it's like, okay now it's like, you know, it's like everything is if I know someone who's an atheist, I'm more likely to say I'm an atheist if I really am an atheist. Okay. So in the internet plays into that too. Now I cannot prove this empirically because everyone got the internet in like a five year window a time. So there's no control group, which is not great, but whatever. Um, so imagine you're an atheist born in Mississippi in 1950.

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Like you are not telling a soul that you're an atheist in Mississippi in 1972. Absolutely not because you're getting ostracized from your family.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: You might even go to church and quietly...

RYAN BURGE: Oh you're probably going to church and quietly going, this is stupid, the entire time, so, but imagine now you're an atheist born in 1995 in Mississippi, and now you've got Reddit and Facebook and social and everything. Now you got the Atheists of Mississippi Facebook group, and now you're not alone. So now you're more willing to say what you are because you know other people that are like you out there. So I think we cannot discount the internet the other thing I want to point out which is always a touchy subject is politics.

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Okay, if you look back at like politics in the 80s, even in the 80s, it was relatively genteel. You know, Tip O'Neill was the Speaker of the House. He was a Democrat. Reagan was President. He was Republican. They would golf on the weekends. Like, they did not hate each other. They disagreed on policy. They did not hate each other.

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And then what happens in the early 1990s is Newt Gingrich comes on the scene, and his whole thing was not only are the Democrats wrong, they're evil. And then the Democrats reciprocated. It's like, if you want to go low, we'll go lower. And so you see this growing, we call it the God Gap or the Pew Gap, where Republicanism has been tied up more and more with being a Christian or a religious person, and the Democrats have more and more become the party of non-religious people. And I think that began in the early 1990s, and it like, it's sort of like the ball rolled down

two different hills at that point and now it's just rolling away from each other more and more and so I'll give you today 2020 when Biden got elected. 45% of his voters were atheists agnostics or nothing in particulars. So almost half the Democratic Coalition today is Nones almost half amongst Republicans. It's 12% Right. So like the parties cannot be, 75% of Republicans today are white Christians. It's 38% of Democrats. So the parties cannot be any different than they are right now. They're only going to be more different in the future as these kind of two lines continue to move away from each other and terms of politics and religion.

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CAREY NIEUWHOF: I think it was in your book. I mean I read pretty widely and if it's not you would be familiar with the stats anyway, but I think I remember the graph that talked about the movement of religious affiliation and party affiliation. And I think it was like, I don't know the exact numbers, but I think it was pretty much a crapshoot in the 1960s. If you were Christian, you know, you had Christian Republicans and Christian democrats. It was six of one half dozen of the other maybe not perfectly equally divided but there would be oh, yeah. Okay. Well, he's Democrat. I'm a republican whatever it was. Was it more widely distributed like the American population 50-60 years ago?

RYAN BURGE: In the late 1980s if you want to an Evangelical Church, you were just as likely to sit next to a Democrat as you were a Republican, as late as 1989.

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Yeah, same thing was true in the Catholic Church, same thing was true in the mainline church too.

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Like, that's when American religion was actually the most diverse, matter of heterogeneous to use a social science term.

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And now what's essentially happened is there's no, there's really no place for white Protestant liberals in most parts of America, like the mainline, which are like the Episcopalians, the United Methodist Church, the United Church of Christ, ABC. In the 1950s, half of Americans were mainline Protestant. Half. Today, it's 10%. 10% today are mainline Protestants, while evangelicals were 17% in 1972 and they're 22% today. There are actually more evangelicals in America today than there were in the 1970s. While the mainline has basically collapsed, on an average Sunday in

America. There are 375,000 episcopalians in worship across the country 375,000. There are 13.2 million Southern Baptists in about half of them report going to church. So 6 million 327,000 versus 6 million. There is no real left of center white Protestant tradition in America anymore. When it used to be there were there was left right and Center in the buffet of American protestantism. And now it's really just one thing over and over again for most parts of America.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Was America ever truly a Christian Nation? This is much debate it right the founding fathers were Deist but not Christians, etc. Etc.

RYAN BURGE: Why are you trying to get me in trouble today? Like that's what I want to know. Okay, I'll give you data on this. So don't yell at me yell at the data. I actually am working on a textbook right now for Oxford.

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It's called the American Religious Landscape Facts Trends in the Future and I just wrote the chapter on the history of American religion going back to 1776 with the best data that we have available to share of Americans who are part of a religious tradition at the Revolution was 17%. 17%, okay, the interesting compared this becomes from a book called The Church of America by Finke and Stark which is an amazing piece of work came out in 2005. They worked so hard to try to grab as much data as they could from all points of American History. They make this comparison. There were more women gave birth less than nine months after they got married than went to church every Sunday.

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So we've never been like this shining city on a hill of like virtuous values from we were a bunch of scoundrels and scallywags and weirdos and and immoral people from the very beginning It's just we recreated our past in like this idyllic Leave it to Beaver way what makes us look better than we actually were we were never as religious as we thought we were and So the way we understand it is it was really low during the revolution It rose pretty rapidly through the 1800s and really religiosity in America hit its peak in the 1950s. Now that's cultural religiosity though. Not like what an evangelical would call religiosity. For instance, like Eisenhower was asked about this. He goes I want you to be religious. I just don't care what kind.

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You know like evangelicals but no no no like you gotta be with us. Like that's not the kind of religion that existed in America in the 1950s. It was just like be religious. We

don't care what God you worship or what church you go to just go to church now. It's like no you're only religious if you go to the kind of church that I think is preaching the proper gospel. So the conceptions are totally different now of religiosity compared to 50 years ago or even 200 years ago. We can't use our perception today to look back in American history and make a direct comparison about how religious we were.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Ryan that is such a good observation for almost everything. We always look back from the current view and view history through some lens we think should have applied. So this may be speculation and it might be on answerable but if 17% at the time of the revolution were broadly considered Christians or church-going people. What percentage do you think would be Nones or atheists or agnostics or is there no way of telling?

RYAN BURGE: It was probably not they were atheist/agnostic, they just didn't want to they were they were the nothing in particular category. Like okay, you know like religion's a thing. I know it exists. I don't really like it either way and at that point by the way the largest churches where the congregational churches and the Episcopal church. So it was like high church was very strong in those days which was founded and funded by like really rich people who you know, it wasn't like Baptist religion Baptist were actually really small in the revolution. They grew rapidly during the early 1800s. So the kind of church that people rebelled against and also here's the other part of the whole thing most colonies had a state church that was funded through taxpayer dollars.

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So the congregational church and that's like in the book that thinking starts to make this point that the reason the main line is declined so rapidly is because it had a funding stream Like it had guaranteed and so what they say is, you know It makes a church grow fast give a guy a hundred bucks a horse and say go out West and start a church Don't come back. There's no more money for you here So you got to learn how to preach well, serve well, give well, be well, if you have a guaranteed funding stream, you're not gonna preach that well You're not gonna try that hard because you've got all this money coming in and so what you know What thinking stark say is like if you look they have a great visual in the book It's Evanston, Illinois the first United Methodist Church free math or United Methodist Church. They had pews listed and how much it was to sit in that pew for the entire year It's called a pew tax. And so by the way, the most expensive pews were in the middle halfway back.

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Like kind of middle middle, the front row is actually cheaper and the back row was the cheapest but the middle was the most expensive so that's how they funded themselves not through offerings but through pew taxes, but Baptists didn't do it that way, right, Baptists were like, well start a church, pass the plate, if we don't have enough money, we're closing down. So that's what they make this argument that like have a church that has a guaranteed funding stream is not going to grow very fast. It's almost like a startup, you know, you see them with money and you let them go and give them a little bit of Runway then they got to build the rest of the runway so they can take off but don't build too much of the runway for them. That's the kind of religion that grew fast in America.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Fascinating, that's such an American, you know, I remember the first time I taught in Germany. I'm going back this year, but I was meeting with the pastor and he had questions for me. He said I said well how many people come out to your church on Sunday? He said we have three.

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And I'm like no that's impossible. Exactly. That was my reaction. I'm like that's impossible. Then I realized he was state-funded because there is no economic model that that works under in any non-funded thing. He was state-funded his, you know, the state tax took care of his salary, his stipend, so he could live with three people in his pews or nobody in his pews and I'm just like wow that is such a foreign mindset, but for our European listeners, we'll throw that one in. Okay, man, Ryan, I feel like this could be a seven-hour exploration.

RYAN BURGE: Joe Rogan 3 hour conversation.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Well, I think we'll do a round two on this one. This is great. So we're talking about church trends for 2024. What else do we need to know about the Nones which is atheist agnostic and nothing in particular.

RYAN BURGE: So a couple things one is that they're not just Democrats anymore.

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Like you don't get to 30 % of the population by being one thing, right? It's not just a bunch of like young hippie liberal kids, white kids who are like joining the Nones club

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Or educated scientists.

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RYAN BURGE: Exactly. Like it's not what you, in your head, I need people to stop thinking about the Nones like the Nietzsche quoting philosophy professor with the elbow patches like that ain't it. It's everybody and anybody now and it's affecting every part of American society. So rich, poor, young, old, black, white, Asian, Hispanic, you know, every group is being affected by this. And I think, but here's how I want you to think about this, okay? We think about religion in three ways. Behavior, belief, and belonging. Three B's of religion. Behavior, belief, belonging. Behavior is the first thing that goes. That's going to a house of worship. That's usually how we measure behavior.

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So about 52.53% of Americans go to church less than once a year now. Okay, so that's a big hunk. A lot of people are a None on that metric alone. Belonging a second. That is what is your present religion of any? Okay. Let me talk about a third of Americans say now say they're Nones by belonging. But here's a little bit of hope. On belief measures only 15% of Americans say that God doesn't exist or that we can't know if God exists or not. So, you know 52% never attending, 30% Nones, only 15% are atheist agnostic by belief. So that's the way it goes behavior goes first, belonging goes second, belief goes third,, even amongst people who never attend religious Services. They are just as likely to say that God doesn't exist as they say that God exists and I have no doubt about it.

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We are still a very believing when I talk about the Nones, I'm almost always talking about belonging measure, but by other measures like things look a lot different and most Nones, not most Nones. One third of nothing in particulars say religion is somewhat or very important in their lives. One third of nothing in particular, and really what the rubber meets the road for a lot of Christians. They need to hear this part specifically is I have panel data which asks the same people the same questions from 2011 to 2020 so you can track individual-level movement in American society. Amongst people who were atheists in 2011 less than 1% of them became Christians by 2020 less than 1% Okay amongst agnostics. It was 3% when from agnostic to Christian nine years later. amongst nothing in particulars, 16 % of them became Christians nine years later. So, from a marketing standpoint, think about this. 1% of 6% of the population, that's what atheists are, 6% of the population. 1% of 6% of the population is 0.06% of the population, okay? 3% of 6% of the population is 0.18% of the population. 16% of 23% of the population is over 3 % of the population went from being a nothing in particular to a Christian, which is more, 3% or 0.06%. That's

a lot more, guys. It's like 500 times more people go from nothing in particular to Christian compared to atheist to Christian.

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So, here's the upshot of that. Stop debating atheists. It's stupid. It's a waste of your time. It is not a good ROI and like Philip Yancey said one time, he goes, no one ever became a Christian because they lost the argument. That is not the way that we do things. Why don't you focus on the nothing in particular because there's a lot of them and B, they don't hate you. Bring them back focus on them. You're gonna have a much better ROI if you focus on that on that, you know two 23% of Americans were nothing in particular.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: See, this is where I think America is starting to sync up with Canada. So most of the listeners to this podcast are American. I have spent a lot of time in the US, but I'm a Canadian and I grew up in a post-Christian culture and consistently.

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13 to like single digits go to church on a Sunday 5-10%. It's super small. But only 13% of Canadians consider themselves atheist or maybe a few more would be agnostic but it's a tiny atheist pool and my experience here has been most people are spiritual. So you talk to an unchurched person in a grocery store or a gas station. You're like, hey, you know, what do you you know, not that you strike up those conversations, but if you did ask them what are your views, you know, theologically or spiritually they'd be like, oh, yeah. I'm a spiritual person a lot would tell you. Yeah, I'm a Christian. I think they're I believe in God, they don't know what that means. But they that that doesn't like in the Barna definition, they don't have an active personal faith, but they're open.

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And that's, I think, what you're saying in America is that to look out at all the people, even the cynical, distrustful, anti-institutional, anti-governmental people might still have some kind of a spiritual identity that they would say, oh yeah, I believe there's a higher power, I think there's something out there beyond us. Is that what you're saying?

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RYAN BURGE: Most people do not hate religion, okay? Like, even amongst the Nones. I'm actually \$350,000 grant to do the largest ever survey of non-religious

Americans to basically figure out what their orientation towards religion is. You know, like, I think what we see in the culture is there's evangelical atheists, right, who are like, I'm an atheist and you got to be an atheist too. I think there's a lot of libertarian atheists too who are like, I'm an atheist, but you can do whatever the heck you want over there, that's your life, you know, do your thing.

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But there's a lot of people who are spiritual, who are seeking who are interested in religion, but just have problems with the institution of like we talked about institutional trust is all time lows right there. They don't like the institution of religion. I think the median none is in that camp. They like Jesus. They probably express some level of theological understanding of Jesus in the resurrection in the Bible and things like that, but they cannot do the social part of it, right? They cannot do the institutional part of it. They're not anti. They don't think the problem is social media amplifies extreme voices on both sides, you know, like exvangelicals for instance, you know, what percentage of Americans are exvangelical? It's probably like no 3%

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Like that's the best estimate.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: But they get all the traffic.

RYAN BURGE: They get all the traffic. Everyone wants to talk about them. Like that's like listen everyone deserves their own voice but not everyone deserves their own megaphone. And I think social media is given everyone a megaphone that They Don't Really Deserve sometimes and like that's an interesting conversation, but let's not say like, oh the death of the evangelical church because of exvangelicals bringing it down. That's not what's happening here. Most people when you ask about the religion, they're like, it's fine. I don't go but it's okay if you go that's the median None and I think we need to think a lot more about that moderates don't march Carey. They don't hold signs. You know what I mean? They just kind of go meh about everything that is the person you have to convince not to start writing Avis atheist. You see on social media. It's just the person who doesn't care either way about religion.

[01:02:09.100]

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Yeah, and this is what you wrote about with Jim Davis and the great de --churching. Is there something like 40 million Americans who are actually sometimes more Orthodox than the people who go to church, which is really

peculiar. I mean, as far as, you know, checking the theological boxes off, they're just religiously unaffiliated. Can you remind us, like, I know Jim talked about this on his episode, but was it the number one reason for people disaffiliating from church? Was it that they moved? Is that what it was?

[01:02:41.300]

RYAN BURGE: It's so boring. I moved.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: I moved and I didn't find another.

[01:02:46.400]

So I moved. I went to college. I didn't de-convert. I just couldn't find a church. I'm having so many conversations with people who are like, yeah, we moved and we just, in our city, we just can't find a church.

[01:02:56.000]

RYAN BURGE: That's it. That's but that's the thing. It's not a sexy headline Gary like that's not gonna make the newer time like the big story of like I'm gay or like I voted for Hillary Clinton like then I left church, like those are salacious stories that get clicks and likes and retweets and views, you know, the boring story is I moved and I just got too lazy to find a new church. So I stopped going I would go back if I found the right church, but I can't and you know what's funny about those groups by the way, the number one reason why they would go back to church like the constant theme you see over and over again is friends friends friends friends friends friends friends. Friends is literally like the key to the whole thing. Would you I would go back if my friends went there or I would go back to meet new friends.

[01:03:39.500]

Pastors. I love you. Okay. I'm one of you kind of I'm by vocational. I have very little theological training not everything is a vertical problem guys. Not everything is a spiritual problem. If you know, you can pray for things all you want, but don't forget the fact that church is both a vertical institution, but also a horizontal institution at the same time. It's people hanging out with people. People come, I know you want to think they come because you're a great preacher who wants to hear you preach. I'm sure that's not true. They come because they want to be with their friends. They want to be with people that are like them. And I think we got to think more about the horizontal that the church provides might actually be more salvific in some ways not like in the spiritual sense, but you know what I mean and the emotional sense the relational sense then the vertical is focus a little bit more not everything is a

vertical problem guys. There are some horizontal problems your church has focus on those for a while.

[01:04:38.100]

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Oh, man, preach. Okay, we're coming full circle here because we talked about the distrust, the breakdown of social institutions, not just the church, but clubs, etc., etc. I was speaking at a conference about six months ago, very small event. Everybody owned an agency or a SaaS company, and I was one of the speakers, one of the participants. And during the Q&A after my talk, a very young leader said to me, I grew up in church. I really believe in the value of community. I can no longer convince my friends to be part of a community because they don't know what community is. They've never had it modeled. They grew up out of church. They don't know what it is. Everyone eats dinner in front of their devices, they don't talk to each other. They go to their rooms. We live separate lives. You know, I'm with you on the worry about civilization collapsing. Do you have any stats on community and the state of the younger generations that are shareable at this point? Because I think I think what she said what she told me is like, oh crap. I had that was a new category for me because I'm like, well we can call them back. It's like no there's nothing to call them back to because they never experienced it.

RYAN BURGE: See that's that's something that I very much worried about. There's a lot of data about the oddness of Generation Z. Okay. So what do I mean about oddness? Okay.

[01:06:04.700]

Um the share who felt lonely or isolated amongst gen Z 61%. The question was asked during your teen years. Did you do the following things or feel the following things? Okay. Gen Z 61% said they felt isolated or lonely often. Amongst the Baby Boomers thinking back on their teenagers only 36% said they felt lonely or isolated often. Okay. 78% of Boomers said they had a boyfriend or girlfriend when they were teenagers. It's only 56% of Gen Z.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Sex is dying with them, too, and intimacy and relationships.

RYAN BURGE: It 82% of Boomers had a part-time job. It's only 58% of generations Z. Did you know that only 25% of 16-year-olds have a driver's license right now?

[01:06:50.800]

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Yeah, what is going that's come up a few times like by the way, does somebody qualify I'm not saying your teenager should be having sex. Please

don't message me. I'm just saying it's something to say they're even losing interest in love What's going on with driver's licenses. Yeah, I mean I have two boys. They're in their 30s and late 20s now 16th birthday, it's like let's go dad. And increasingly fewer and fewer people it's it's the idea that we need to bubble them as much as we possibly can and and don't give them too many responsibilities. I think they're they're scared because we've scared them into doing things You know, I mean like the world's just scared to go back to trust right to go full circle back to trust, the world is a scary place. Do you know how many amber alerts there are in this country a year?

[01:07:36.500]

It's a staggeringly small number Carey. Like the number of honest-to-God kidnappings in this country is incredible. Like, you know white van kidnappings not like a parent took the kid right not like random random like true. It's less than 100 a year in the entire country. Now listen, every one's a tragedy. Don't get me wrong here. I'm not trying to minimize any of that stuff but statistically you're you should be more worried about your kid walking across the road than being kidnapped. Like that's way more, riding in a car is way more dangerous than getting kidnapped. We're afraid of everything and we have no concept of community because here's the thing. If you don't have a community, you don't know other people or good people you assume the worst about those people.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: All you see are the headlines. All you see is the viral stuff. Oh, yeah, you know, it was interesting. I was talking to a group of leaders the other day and we were talking about just that anxiety and gen Z and I'm like so according to a couple of studies. I've read crime peaked in the 1990s. Is that correct?

[01:08:35.500]

RYAN BURGE: That's absolutely correct.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: I was very much alive in the 1990s. I am I feel way less safe today than I did in the 1990s. Like maybe I was almost murdered five times. I don't remember but like I just I don't I was very comfortable in the 1990s and maybe I was in greater danger, but because the perception of danger is higher today, even though the reality of it is lower like there's something ,and I think you're back to the power of community, you know back to, hey, I don't know their everyone's trustworthy. But I'm gathering with 100 people on a regular basis who are different than me. Some are rich, some are poor, some different skin color than me, different accent than me. You know what the mostly good people a little bit weird, but really decent people and life is good and maybe those of us who are older we grew up with

that and gosh this is like a clarion call. This is like, like we have to do something about this, right?

[01:09:38.200]

So, what do we do about it?

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Well, I think the churches need to think, and this is what I implore churches to think is, can you set aside 5% of your budget for nothing but social activity?

[01:09:48.800]

Like, you've got a fellowship hall. You've probably got a nice yard. Most churches do have a nice yard. They got a nice facility, right? You've got classrooms. You've got, listen, do a barbecue and do it on a Saturday. And it starts whenever it starts and ends whenever it ends. You know, like let it go as long as it needs to go. Do not have an evangelistic sermon in the middle. Don't hand everyone a contact card. Don't do a praise and worship concert. Let people sit. Now, have games and stuff for the kids to do and activities, you know, for everyone to engage in. But if people want to sit and talk with each other, just give them space to do that. The one thing I hate is, like, when church ends, there's always some dude who's like turning the lights off.

[01:10:27.900]

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Like yeah, we're stacking the chairs. We're stacking the chair.

RYAN BURGE: Gotta go, get out of here. Like no, you don't have to get out of there. One person's job, their ministry should be, I will stay as long as people want to talk. You know, I mean if they want to sit in the pew for 20 minutes 40 minutes an hour after church and just have a conversation with someone else in the Pew. I will leave the lights on and hang out somewhere else in the building until they're ready to leave that is what church should be is a place where people so have a carnival, backpack giveaway, potluck, you know, give purely social with no wvangelistic message behind it. Just let people have space we call them third space is right. So first is home, second space is work, what's your third space?

[01:11:08.400]

Most people don't have a third space and actually a lot of people one and two are the same space now because they work from home give them another space to go hang out with people and be social your church was designed that way like structurally architecturally to have people gather allow them to gather and talk to each other and watch miracles happen as people make connections and build friend networks

and the new people come because there are friends there and that's how you grow. You might be a great preacher, but the most important way for your church to grow is horizontally not vertically, so get people on your grounds for bad reasons social reasons.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: You know what, you've solved a debate that we've been having in the art of leadership academy so members hey, this is because everyone's struggling with we did this carnival and nobody came on Sunday and I'm like, yeah, I don't know maybe you gotta and I'm like, you know, you just gave her a dumped a purpose to it. What a great idea. What a great idea.

[01:12:02.900]

So, you know the stat, and it could be completely apocryphal, and it may not be top of mind for you, but it's often quoted. But something like 81% of people would come to church if a friend invited them. Is there truth to that? Do you know any stats in that area? It gets paraded around so often. I think it resonates, like I think it is true, and based on the data you've shared. But do you have any data as to the likelihood of accepting an appropriate invitation to church?

[01:12:30.500]

RYAN BURGE: Here's what I know. The number one reason why people vote is because someone asked them to. The number one reason why people register to vote is because someone asked them to. Like there's so much tangible data out there that says that people just need a personal invitation from you to go do something else.

[01:12:48.900]

And they're more likely to do that. I'll give you a good example. I'm going to watch a musical on Saturday. It's the Tina Turner musical. It's the Fox Theater in St. Louis. The only reason I'm going is because my friend so we really like and I really have a good time with asked us to go. I would never go on my own. I'm a very suggestible human being just like everyone else is on planet Earth and we want to go do stuff so ask people to go do stuff. You want to go to the movies with me, you want to have dinner with me? Like I think that's the problem as soon as we're afraid to do things like that. Like ask people to do stuff together because they might say no Keep asking right keep asking and the problem is if I walk into a church. I don't know anybody and I walk in a church and no one looks like me. I'm leaving if I walk in a church with someone who invited me. At least I know one person there who's like me I'm staying

because they're gonna make me stay I think you got to have that personal connection with anything whatever organization it is church or otherwise

[01:13:40.700]

Personal connection, you know this marketing the best kind of marketing is face-to-face personal marketing not like bombing people with ads on social media. Yes. I don't know the number. I'm telling you people inviting people is way cooler than you preaching a great sermon.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Great. Spoken by two preachers in this interview. So what, you know, you've traced out a lot of hope, which is super encouraging because you look at the trends you can look at the data and just get depressed and want to throw in the towel any other beacons of hope that are coming to mind?

RYAN BURGE: Oh my goodness. Carey, put me on the spot here. Okay, so I think there's some some signs of non-denominational Christianity is doing really well. It's the only type only family in Protestant Christianity that's growing. So the Lutherans are down Baptist her down method down.

[01:14:29.600]

So the SBC is declining rapidly. We all know that. They went from 16.2 million in 2006 to 13.2 million today, so they lost 3 million people. There are 22 million non-denominational Christians in America today. It's the second largest, after the Catholic Church, the second largest religious group in America today. So I think it's not that denominations are declining, which is bad news, but it's just Protestantism is being remade in this non-denominational model for good, bad, or indifferent.

[01:14:57.300]

So there's some good things going on there. Like I said, I think belief in America is still relatively robust.

[01:15:02.900]

I think there's a hard ceiling on the number of nones. I think we're going to, 20 years down the line, we're going to see it's not going to continue to rise like it is right now. So I think that's good news in some weird way.

[01:15:12.900]

I also think that you know, if you look at the data people are willing to be more open to new experiences now than they've ever been before like in post-covid. I think like

I saw a stat more people want to travel overseas now than any point in the last 40 years.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: You can see it at the airports.

RYAN BURGE: Well, absolutely. Like that's a cool thing though from like a religious perspective too because it means they're open to new things. And I think that like to me that's a green shoot of they're open to new experiences. And I think religion might be a new experience for some of them. So I think in some ways COVID ruined us and I think some way COVID opened us to new ideas. And so I think that's my hopefulness is that people have not changed that dramatically over the last 50 or 100 years. They still need to gather together. I just think religious institutions need to stop operating with a model that they've had for 50 or 75 years. That's not the model that works anymore. There are ways to reach out to these people. They don't hate you. Okay? That's the overall me sense. They don't hate you. They just don't care about you. So give them reasons to care about you.

[01:16:13.400]

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Ryan this is amazing. I'm gonna have to save the rest for around two but this has been a delightful conversation. I've learned so much anything that we haven't talked about that you'd like to share before we wrap up.

RYAN BURGE: Oh, I got a plug of course, Carey. Oh, yeah graphsaboutreligion.com is my substack. That's a good that's a good name isn't it, Carey? It's good branding.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Fantastic. It's easy. A lot easier than spelling careynieuwhof.com.

RYAN BURGE: Someone DM's me and it's like hey, could you like talk to some Nones? Like do interview I go tap the sign it's called [graphs about religion.com](http://graphsaboutreligion.com). Literally, it's just graphs about religion, two posts a week. You can follow me on social media at Ryan Burge, ryanburge.net. I've got the Nones version 2 which came out in May. I wrote *The Great Dechurching* with Jim Davis and Michael Graham that came out in August. I've got a textbook with Oxford coming out next year called *The American Religious Landscape Facts and the Future* just a really sort of like basic textbook of what American religious demography looks like.

[01:17:11.800]

And I got that great Templeton grant, so I'm going to do a survey of non-religious Americans and hopefully write a book about that that will come out in the next 18 months.

CAREY NIEUWHOF: And at some point, you'll sleep, right?

RYAN BURGE: Listen, I just work very fast, Carey. That's what I realized. I work very, very fast. That's, and you know what? It makes me happy. And the people, they learn about the world and they win, I win, we all win, you know?

[01:17:34.500]

CAREY NIEUWHOF: Absolutely. Ryan, can't thank you enough. Thank you so much.

[01:17:38.100]

RYAN BURGE: Appreciate it.

[01:17:39.000]

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, I didn't think you'd be disappointed with that one. Man, I love that conversation. We have show notes to a lot of the things that we talked about in the show at careynieuwhof.com/episode624. We also have transcripts there and that is because a couple of things. First of all, you keep sharing episodes like this. Thank you for doing that. We're off to a great start in January. And if this episode meant something to you, would you click on the share button, text it to a friend, share it on social media, let us know. And if you would be so kind, leave us a rating and review. I also know because this is a new year and new patterns. If you're a new listener and a lot of you are subscribe and you'll never miss an episode including the next episode in this series. So you can do that wherever you're listening or watching this podcast.

I want to make sure you check out our partners on this podcast as well Craig Groeschel, Chris Hodges and myself and others have created a brand new course with Westfall Gold called Advance. It's a masterclass video series to help pastors and church leaders grow the courage and skill to unleash generosity in your church. You can learn more at advance.westfallgold.com or click the link in the description of the episode and if you're ready to dive into AI, hey, we're going to make it simple. We've got free ai-powered tools for content creation, decision-making, marketing, and more. You can go to Alcopilot.church or click the link in the description of this episode. That's something that I partnered with Church.Tech to create just for you.

[01:19:09.800]

Our church trans series continues next episode with Brady Shearer in the house. We're gonna do part 4, we're going to talk about all things social media man. I learned so much stuff about Instagram tiktok the best social media strategy for

churches and the new metrics for digital Church Brady and I talked about a lot here is an excerpt.

Brady SheareRyan Burge: He said I went to the grocery store to pick up my groceries that we had already ordered online. He's like I was having a bad day. I'm just waiting and I'm just like, they're taking forever to get it together. They finally bring me my grocery and the guy looks at me goes, are you a pastor? Because you've been on my my TikTok feed this week and then that happened to him again a second time where he's a bi-vocational pastor and this person came to him was like are you also a pastor because you were on my TikTok feed.

[01:19:52.100]

Carey Nieuwhof: So that's next episode. Also that continues our church trends series. Also coming up this month, John Mark Comer, John Ortberg, plus we have Adam Hamilton, Jamie Kern Lima, Craig Groechel is back. I've got John Chasteen, Jenny Allen, and a whole lot more. So if you subscribe, you'll never miss an episode. And again, if you enjoyed this, thank you so much for sharing and letting us know. Hey, if you want to continue the conversation about 2024 church trends, I've got a leader guide for you. It's a team guide. You can get it at the link in the description of this episode. Got a lot stacked up there. And we're back next time with a fresh episode. Thank you so much for tuning in. And I hope our time together today has helped you identify and break a growth barrier you're facing.