

## Framed

FOR SOME YEARS now, I have been wrestling and researching. Can you wrestle and research at the same time? I certainly hope so, or at least that's what tends to happen to me. Something starts to bug me – an idea, a set of circumstances that seem to evoke a pattern – and I chase its consequences until I either strike gold at the end of the rainbow or strike out. What was bugging me in this instance was the increasing number of Western people (I use “Western” to mean those who have inherited the predominantly Christian culture that for hundreds of years has influenced Europe, America, Canada, Australia and elsewhere) who seem to be giving up on Christianity. That so-called “secularization” trend is nothing new, but for a while academics and scholars noted that in America the trend of increasing secularization was being bucked by a contrary trend of church growth. Then the tables turned, and it became apparent that in America too there were increasing numbers of people giving up on Christianity. Perhaps that's you or someone you know. I guess we're all familiar with it, at least. But what I was wrestling with was:

Why? It's not a momentary matter for me. My doctorate research at Cambridge University was focused on such questions. And my pastoral work next to Yale had given me firsthand experience of the practical outworkings of "postmodernism." Now, though, there seemed to be a fresh wave.<sup>1</sup>

What I decided to do, as I wrestled and researched, was to get out of my box, to get down out of the ivory tower, to climb down from the pulpit (metaphorically speaking), and talk to people who either had rejected Christianity or, despite pressure not to do so, had accepted Christianity. I wanted to have conversations. To be journalistic-y. Talk to real live people and ask them why they believed (or why they did not). I found out some fascinating things, and a pattern began to emerge.

That pattern was that in the minds of many, if not all, Christianity had been "framed." It had become associated with nefarious and nasty traits. Others still framed Christianity more positively, of course. But there was always this frame, a predominantly negative frame in Western culture today, that pushed a particular perspective on the teachings of the Christian faith.

One might argue – and this would be a fun exercise for a philosophy class – that one cannot escape some sort of frame; we need a paradigm (to echo the philosopher of science, Thomas Kuhn) in order to know anything. (Perhaps. I don't want to go down that rabbit hole.) But

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1 At the time of writing, there is some sign of a reversal of the trend. The younger generations, especially younger men, may be returning to church, though the evidence is still disputed. "Quiet revival' in the UK as Gen Z goes to church," *Christian Today*. <https://www.christiantoday.com/news/quiet-revival-in-the-uk-as-gen-z-goes-to-church>. Accessed February 13, 2026.

there are frames and then there are frames – there are ways of looking at the world that are garnered from the data, and then there are imposed frames that prevent you from seeing the data for what it is. So it seemed to me that my task was to present not just a kind of basic Christianity, a mere Christianity, but a Christianity that was “unframed” – without these negative, or too piously positive, frames that get in the way of actual understanding.

This book is the result. You’ll find conversations throughout it with both leading Christians and leading non-Christians. And, more to the point, you’ll find Christianity unframed. But first of all, I want to introduce you to a stunning contrast.

### A STUNNING CONTRAST

While studying for his PhD at Harvard University, Nicholas Wolterstorff remembered that the attitude of the professors towards his faith was, “Wolterstorff’s religious but he’s also intelligent, so he’ll probably get over it.”<sup>2</sup> Presumably to his doctoral supervisor’s surprise, then, Wolterstorff instead became part of a new wave of God-believers at the elite level of the academic discipline of philosophy. Now the *Society of Christian Philosophers*, of which Wolterstorff was a founder, is the largest American philosophy society, publishing “one of the most important philosophy journals in the English language.”<sup>3</sup>

Bart Ehrman, on the other hand, took a different direction. He went to evangelical bastions Moody Bible Institute and

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2 Interview with Nicholas Wolterstorff, October 20, 2021.

3 “History,” Society of Christian Philosophers. [https://www.societyofchristianphilosophers.com/content.aspx?page\\_id=22&club\\_id=560358&module\\_id=340659](https://www.societyofchristianphilosophers.com/content.aspx?page_id=22&club_id=560358&module_id=340659). Accessed May 31, 2023.

Wheaton College before going on to the elite Princeton University. At Princeton, Ehrman studied under renowned scholar Bruce Metzger. Probably not an evangelical as such, Metzger was nonetheless welcomed in evangelical circles because he held to the basic reliability of the biblical text. Ehrman’s spiritual journey, despite his evangelical background and the intellectually prestigious support for the Bible from Metzger, was the opposite of Wolterstorff’s. Ehrman gradually moved away from his evangelical roots, finding a temporary waypoint in a more liberal faith. Today, he no longer believes in God. Ehrman has become what he describes as an “agnostic atheist.” By this he means he is not sure whether God exists, but he definitely does not believe in him.<sup>4</sup>

What’s the difference? Outside of the inscrutable sovereignty of God, is there any discernible pattern?<sup>5</sup> Why do some believe and some not? What makes some people “deconstruct” their faith in its entirety? What can we learn from the frequently referenced statistics of religious decline in the West about the future of Christianity in technologically advanced, secular societies?

### **LIES, DAMNED LIES AND STATISTICS**

Those statistics are more nuanced than a typical viral internet post might suggest. Yes, in 2022, the Public Religion Research Institute reported that “the proportion of

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4 Interview with Bart Ehrman, July 25, 2022.

5 I don’t mean in any way to downplay the inscrutable sovereignty of God, nor to dismiss biblical teaching about the genesis of faith and unbelief found in famous texts like Psalm 14, Psalm 53 or Romans 1:19 and following. Such texts will be part of the warp and woof of the book going forward.

those who are religiously unaffiliated has risen to 27% from 16% in 2006.”<sup>6</sup> But “most Americans are still Christian.” And though “white evangelical Protestants”<sup>7</sup> have declined from 21.3% in 2011 to 13.6% in 2022, “the proportion of Christians of color as part of the United States’ population remain essentially unchanged from the preceding few years,” that is, 25% of the country.<sup>8</sup> What is more, much, though not all, of the attendance decline in the past fifty years resulted from a sharp drop in attendance among Roman Catholics after Vatican II.<sup>9</sup> While the rise of the “nones,” mostly among Millennials and Generation X, has gained attention, little notice has been paid to the other side

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6 “Religion and Congregations in a Time of Social and Political Upheaval,” *PRRI* (May 16, 2023). <https://www.prri.org/research/religion-and-congregations-in-a-time-of-social-and-political-upheaval/>. Accessed May 31, 2023.

7 A much under-discussed difficulty with these religious surveys is the problem of definition. The current gold standard for surveys is self-definition. That means that if someone claims to be an evangelical, then they are assumed to be and categorized as such. But religious definition is slippery, and self-deception in faith is a recognized spiritual problem. How does self-designation help when what it means to be an evangelical is hard to pin down, and where in some areas it appears to have become a political term rather than a distinctly religious one? This is illustrated by the above comparison between “white evangelicals” and “Christians of color,” even though very often Christians of color believe doctrines that would be historically categorized as evangelical. We will think more of what it really means to be a Christ-follower or an evangelical (which etymologically means a gospel [= evangel] person, or an evangel-ical).

8 “Religion and Congregations in a Time of Social and Political Upheaval.”

9 Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (Rutgers University Press, 2005).

of the faith spectrum. A study published in early 2017 shows that “intense religion – strong affiliation, very frequent practice, literalism, and evangelicalism – is persistent, and in fact, only moderate religion is on the decline in the U.S.”<sup>10</sup> Vitality is found in nondenominational churches. The 2020 U.S. Religious Census shows that nondenominational congregations increased by 4,000 since 2010 and rose by 6.5 million in attendance in that same period.<sup>11</sup> The merchants of religious doom and gloom are overselling. Religion is not “fading into irrelevance as the secularization thesis would suggest.”<sup>12</sup> Plus, of course, biblically-driven faith has continued to thrive and grow in China, Africa and South America. The fastest growing church in the world is in Iran. And there are emerging stories in the Western world of younger generations returning to at least an interest in spirituality, if not church.<sup>13</sup>

That said, anecdotally there is unease: one pastor told me that a third of his colleagues who had graduated from seminary with him had either left the ministry or the faith or both. Another younger ministry leader described the same dynamic of some friends abandoning their faith or adopting that journey of “deconstruction.” And if it is at least reasonably accurate that “the proportion of those

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10 Landon Schnabel, Indiana University; Sean Bock, Harvard University, “The Persistent and Exceptional Intensity of American Religion,” *Sociological Science* 4, (2017), 686–700.

11 Ryan Burge, “Nondenominational Churches Are Adding Millions of Members. Where Are They Coming From?,” *Christianity Today*. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2022/08/nondenominational-growth-mainline-protestant-decline-survey/>. Accessed August 5, 2022.

12 Schnabel and Bock, “The Persistent and Exceptional Intensity of American Religion,” 686–700.

13 “‘Quiet revival’ in the UK as Gen Z goes to church.”