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## Understanding the Non-Religious Demographic: Non-Aligned and not just Non-Religion

*By Paul Hedges*

### SYNOPSIS

*Our usual labels, such as the “non-religious” and “freethinkers”, risk distorting a demographic, which is growing especially amongst the young. It is important to avoid the mistake of categorising it as anti-religious or even blithely as part of the religious demographic. It may be best to describe them as the “Non-Aligned” and to distinguish their attributes in more detail for an enduring basis in appreciating their role in modern society and social cohesion.*

### COMMENTARY

Recently, policymakers and scholars in Singapore and the region have been [debating the place](#) of those often identified as the non-religious within discussions around diversity, inclusion, dialogue, and social cohesion. Representing 1 in 5 of Singapore's population, and a higher proportion amongst younger age groups, this demographic simply cannot be ignored and will become increasingly significant. However, questions arise as to how to engage and understand them.

#### **Naming: The Non-Aligned**

A plethora of terms abound to speak about this group, with the “non-religious”, the “nones”, “freethinkers”, and the “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR) being four of the most prominent. However, a potential problem arises with these terms as they foreground “religion” in speaking about this group. But religion is often not the category which people in this group focus on, or centre around, in terms of identity and making meaning in their lives.

As such, speaking of them as the “Non-Aligned” may be best, as it does not directly place them in relation to religion (as “non-religious” does, for example), nor make them

a subset of things religious like the SBNR nomenclature. It also adds more colour than the “none (of the above)” category, but clearly places people in this group as not affiliated with our usual (religious) groupings.

## **Engaging the Non-Aligned**

As this term highlights though, in being Non-Aligned, this demographic does not belong to a specific group or organisation that can readily be engaged.

For those with a more “religious” inclination, the issue is often that they do not want to be affiliated with a single religious tradition, though they may have a stronger attachment to one religion, or practice across several religious traditions. This can be because they want to be free to pick and choose those parts of religious traditions that make sense to them, or they reject the authority of institutions as too dogmatic, hierarchical, oppressive, or simply not representing their interests. Therefore, they may contrast the “spirituality” they want to claim against the “religion” they associate with an organisation, hence SBNR.

For those who may be staunch atheists, and who often reject both religion and spirituality – though [some atheists claim forms of spirituality](#) or may even engage in practices such as meditation – we also see the same lack of affiliation. Some may identify as Humanists but may or may not join groups such as Singapore’s Humanist Society which represents only a small minority.

For policymakers trying to engage this demographic, this creates problems in knowing who to speak to, as no single central authority or organisation exists. Meanwhile, the wideness of the demographic makes it hard to generalise.

## **Understanding the Non-Aligned**

Inherent in what has been said above is the very diversity of this demographic. Any catch-all phrase or concept is likely to misunderstand them. But we can point to three common mistakes in characterising this demographic.

Firstly, one common mistake is to assume that non-religion means anti-religion. For instance, after the 2010 UK census, the famous biologist and outspoken atheist [Richard Dawkins congratulated Wales](#) in being the most atheistic place across the UK. However, Wales’ high showing of “nones” is very different from people declaring they are atheist. “Atheist” was a choice that could have been selected, but only a tiny demographic actually picked it. Indeed, research of this demographic suggests that far from being anti-religious, [many of the Non-Aligned hold beliefs](#) about such things as deities, the afterlife, ghosts, fate, and other “supernatural” phenomena.

Secondly, for some theologians, religiously inclined scholars, and religious leaders, the Non-Aligned are sometimes dismissed as irrelevant by being seen as simply a group who are largely religious. Hence, we may be told, this large demographic does not represent a major anti-religious contingent, because many have some form of religious or spiritual belief or practice. This, however, does at least two things.

On the one hand, it hides what is partly outright atheism, and for many a very sceptical

agnosticism, or simply indifference to religion. On the other hand, it allows religious leaders to claim they remain the majority, but ignores the growing numbers, especially of younger people, who are rejecting religious leaders and their institutions as speaking for them.

Thirdly, for many, there is an indifference to religion, even if not outright rejection. Indeed, as [Peter Berger has argued](#), in modern secular states, religious identity, of any particular type, is just one option, and this may relativise the claims to ultimacy. Religion is just another lifestyle choice. Indeed, for many, religion may seem irrelevant or uninteresting.

As such, a common mistake is to make the “non-religious” appear as just another bracket within a wider “thinking-about-religion” category. Many do not centre or think about religion in their lives, beliefs, and practices. Hence, the term Non-Aligned both tells us something while taking away direct mention of “religion” in thinking about this demographic.

### **The Non-Aligned in Singapore**

While the Non-Aligned in Singapore have not yet been studied in depth, unlike in other countries both [in the West and increasingly globally](#), it seems likely that similar demographics apply here. One factor that may be different is that, within the Sinitic world, explicit religious belonging or identification with a single tradition has not been usual, so people engage in what has been termed [strategic religious participation](#). Instead of identifying solely with one religion, they engage different traditions pragmatically for different purposes. [One small study](#) has identified this as part of the local landscape.

Also, unlike some Western countries, religion remains very socially salient, and many young atheists and members of the Non-Aligned demographic have [actively engaged in interreligious dialogue](#) events, especially from the Humanist side. The dialogue between atheism and religion is an increasing phenomena globally, and improved understanding may lead [towards better disagreement](#). Indeed, some scholars have called for [interworldview dialogue](#) (instead of just interreligious dialogue) in part because of these changing demographics.

As a generally younger and better educated demographic, both in Singapore and globally, the Non-Aligned will be prominent, and their views need representing in social issues and in the political sphere. However, their very diversity means that policymakers need to find new ways to engage and judge the ground which will require further study and sensitivity to diversity.

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