Since its release last October, the report on religious affiliation by Pew Survey Research has caused quite a stir. Titled “Nones on the Rise,” it revealed that for the first time in history as many as 20% of Americans identify with no religious organization at all. This information has been widely and wildly misinterpreted, with dire warnings about the dangers of America’s growing atheism at one extreme and reassuring observations that 80% of Americans are still religious at the other. It is time to set the record straight.

For starters, the category “none of the above,” refers to the interviewees not identifying with any organized church or religion; it does not mean they do not believe in a god. In fact, 68% of the nones believe in a divine being, just 3 percentage points less than the national average of 71%.

Professing atheists make up fewer than 3% of the survey’s respondents. More than two-thirds of the people in the nones category simply say they follow “nothing in particular”—some 14% of the interviewees.

What do people mean when they say they belong to “nothing in particular,” or in other words, to no religion or religious organization in particular?

Rather than stick to a crisp and careful academic definition, as I usually do, I want to propose a looser understanding. I think it means “I can’t be bothered.” In other words: I can’t be bothered going to church. I can’t be bothered thinking about religion. I don’t spend any time thinking about a god. I’m involved in other things and I don’t really care about this subject.

If atheism is a strongly held feeling, then this is not. Atheists have thought about god or gods and have made a conscious choice to reject them. The “nothing in particular” bunch simply have not given the idea much thought; they can’t be bothered.

This interpretation of the data is supported by an observation made in the Pew report. They say “the increase in the [none of the above category] has taken place almost entirely among the segment of the population that seldom or never attends religious services.” Indeed, there has been an 11% increase in the nones, to just under 50%, from those who do not attend church more than once or twice a year. These people have not been attending a church and so they have largely forgotten about religion.

But what about the 50% of people who seldom or never attend a church or other religious group, but still identify themselves with a religious organization?

They also should be counted in the “I can’t be bothered” category. Think of it this way. There are a number of people whose religious affiliation is rather tenuous. They may have been raised within a religion but now do not think much about it or do much with it. Do they belong or not? If you ask them, what do they say?

Some will have thought about it enough to say, “No, I no longer am affiliated.” By contrast, others will not have thought about it even less. So they may say, for example, “I was raised a Catholic, so I’m still a Catholic even though I have not darkened a church door for 20 years.” By the way, the Catholic Church agrees with this view; you cannot unbaptize yourself.

Can we figure out how many people still give a religious affiliation, but can’t be bothered with religion? Let me cautiously hazard a guesstimation. Nationally, 80% of Americans are affiliated with a religious organization. Just 58% say they pray daily (a figure which includes grace at meals). If the difference between those who belong and those who pray represents the difference between those whose religious beliefs inspire them to do something religious and those who can’t be bothered to do anything religious, we wind up with 22% of the population.

If we add the 22% of the religiously affiliated who can’t be bothered to the 14% of the religiously unaffiliated who can’t be bothered, we wind up with 36% of the population. This means that those who can’t be bothered” make up America’s largest religious block, significantly bigger than Evangelicals, Mainline Protestants, Catholics or Mormons. I would conclude that we should pay more attention to this previously hidden group, but they don’t want to be bothered.