Darlene, a former Evangelical and now a self-identified “religious none” in her sixties, agreed to meet in a nearby coffee shop. Reminiscing about her upbringing, she reflected, religion influenced “every spare minute you had.” This all-encompassing religious life troubled Darlene from an early age. She especially became critical of the perceived closed-mindedness of Evangelicals, saying, “They kept very much to themselves . . . could not see the good in something else. They couldn’t see past what was in front of them.” Later in the same interview with Darlene, she compared her current beliefs about God with those of her former Christian group: “Mine’s not judgmental. Mine does not put huge demands on you. He allows you to experience . . . other people, and love other people for what they are, not what they believe.” She built on this idea of personal freedom, autonomy, and individualism throughout the interview, later celebrating the benefits of leaving her religious affiliation and involvement behind: “I gain more freedom . . . to think what I want, to work it out rather than being told, ‘This is how you should think.’” When asked how confident she was in her status and worldview as a religious none, Darlene replied, “How confident does a person have to be? . . . I don’t think I could be more confident.”

Darlene’s experience has become an increasingly common one in recent decades in both the United States and Canada. Religious nones—those who say they do not belong to any religion—are the fastest growing “religious” tradition in the United States and Canada, and much of the modern Western world. Nearly one-quarter of Canadian and one-fifth of American adults report that they have no religion in recent General Social Surveys, with an even larger one-third of teens and young adults in these countries claiming the same. Best estimates suggest that religious nones will continue to grow for the foreseeable future.
Canada and the United States are very similar in some respects, but as we will see, the proportion of religious nones grew earlier and more rapidly in Canada versus the United States (only recently have religious nones grown sharply in the United States). Some believe that currents in Canada may foreshadow what will happen in the United States. While as sociologists we avoid making predictions about the future, our comparative study in this book explores how a nonreligious identity intersects with several aspects of daily life in sometimes similar and sometimes differing ways in these two nations, offering insights that may help us to understand societal and political trends. This volume offers a look at the paths to becoming a religious none, including how the (non)religiosity of the surrounding region and society affects these biographic pathways; the diverse religious and secular attitudes and behaviors present among religious nones; the sociopolitical beliefs and practices of religious nones in areas such as gender, sexuality, the environment, poverty, and immigration; and the relationships between those who profess to have no religion and religious people and organizations. The knowledge base we provide in this book may help to explain social divides in both moral and political values, and how we can explain these divisions along religious/nonreligious lines.

As with all ways of identifying and understanding aspects of our social world and our daily lives, this concept of the religious “none” as someone who has no religion is a social construct in itself. It is a way of imbuing meaning to a reality that has become taken for granted by many in our society, a product of this time (the last half century or so) and this place (notably European and North American societies) because of a series of historical, cultural, and physical factors shaping the social environments in which we live. For the “none” phenomenon to become possible, there needs to be a context where religion is understood as distinct from other aspects of life (e.g., the economic, the political, the domestic), with distinct memberships, beliefs, and practices—a context where individuals can thus conceive of being without a religion. These conditions are now present for many in the United States and Canada, and in many traditionally Judeo-Christian societies across the Western world. Other scholars have explored some of the roots of this evolution in how religion and nonreligion have been understood throughout Judeo-Christian social history (see, for example, Berger 1967; Taylor
2007). In this book, however, we focus more on how individuals who say they have no religion define and use this aspect of their identity, and how it influences other aspects of current social life. Although the religious “none” is at its core a social construction, as with all such constructs it has become real in its consequences for many individuals and for our societies.

Some aspects of Darlene’s life changed when she left her religion behind. Notably, she stopped taking part regularly in religious group activities. Yet, though she was now identifying as a religious none, Darlene acknowledged attending the occasional Christmas service when she visited her mother. However, she was quick to note, “I don’t enjoy it.” She also watched the Gaither Vocal Band on television on occasion, for the “harmony,” not the lyrics, which she noted she had a “hard time believing a lot of times.” Darlene’s reflections remind us of the Christian reference point that many religious nones have in the United States and Canada. Yet, it is also important to understand that, although some of the same “religious” behaviors may exist among the religiously affiliated and unaffiliated, individuals in these two groups attach different personal and social meanings and functions to those behaviors—meanings and functions that we will explore in this book based on firsthand accounts from religious nones. Additionally, we argue in this book that, as individuals become further removed from organized religion and with many members of younger generations having little to no religious upbringing, not only do differences in personal and social meanings grow between the unaffiliated and affiliated, but so do differences in some behaviors as well.

Alongside the rise in recent decades of individuals saying they have no religion, studies of this topic have also begun to appear, fulfilling calls in the late 1960s and early 1970s for rigorous social scientific research into this phenomenon (Bahr 1970; Campbell 1971; Vernon 1968). Three key observations stand out from the research to date. First, these studies have stressed that the proportion of religious nones is growing. And we know a lot about their sociodemographic characteristics. Although religious nones come in all shapes and sizes, in most settings they are more likely to be male, younger, higher educated, not married, without children, and more liberal in their opinions and values (Clarke and Macdonald 2017; Gee and Veevers 1989; Hayes 2000; Hout and Fischer 2002;
Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006; Kosmin and Keysar 2008; Lewis, Currie, and Oman-Reagan 2016; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Second, we are gradually learning more about what contributes to the growth of the religious none category: social acceptance toward irreligion, negative reactions against religious fundamentalism, rejection of the fusion between religion and politics, irreligious socialization, and intellectual disagreement with religious beliefs and practices (Bengtson, Putney, and Harris 2013; Bruce 2011; Bullivant 2008a; Clarke and Macdonald 2017; Hout and Fischer 2002; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Schwadel 2010; Thiessen 2015; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2017; Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale 2016). Third, recent research sheds light on the heterogeneous religious, spiritual, and secular beliefs and practices among religious nones (Baker and Smith 2015; Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam 2010; Manning 2015; Storm 2009; Voas and Day 2010; Wilkins-Laflamme 2015). Although many nones are nonbelievers or agnostics, as we just saw with Darlene’s story, there are also those who hold beliefs in a higher power.

Yet amid these existing research findings in the field, much of which comes from the United States, we are surprised at how few regional and international comparisons have been made between religious nones from different social contexts, and in particular across the United States and Canada. Little has been written on religious nones in Canada at all (recent exceptions, as we wrote this manuscript, include Beaman 2017; Beaman and Steele 2018; Bibby 2017; and Clarke and Macdonald 2017)—a nation that is significantly less religious on a range of indicators compared with the United States and, until recently, has had a much larger proportion of religious nones. This dearth of research particularly struck us as we were independently working on qualitative interview and quantitative survey projects respectively on Canadian religious nones (Thiessen 2015; Wilkins-Laflamme 2015), only to discover each other’s work in the process. This point of contact laid the groundwork to pursue collaborative work (see Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2017), of which this book is one aspect.

Of course, the gaps in the existing literature go well beyond the absence of comparative studies on religious nones in the United States and Canada. Several other research opportunities stand out to us: (a) While we know that different types of disaffiliation as well as irreligious
socialization play a role in the rise of those who say they have no religion, we know little about the biographic pathways into becoming a religious none and how these are influenced by the surrounding social environment. Here we have an opportunity to develop a comprehensive model of factors that lead people to say they have no religion. (b) There is a need for a thorough model of macro-demographic trends affecting the size of the religious none population. In this regard, while many authors assume that the religious none population will continue to grow, will countervailing forces such as non-Western immigration and lower birth rates among religious nones slow or reverse this growth in certain areas? (c) Works on spiritual and secular meaning systems among nones in the United States are increasing, but few similar works exist in Canada. (d) Data in the United States reveal distinct sociopolitical attitudes and behaviors among religious nones, but how does this compare in Canada, and might beliefs and practices shift as the religious none group grows? (e) What attitudes exist among religious nones, religious majorities, and religious minorities, and how do these attitudes affect group interaction?

Our central aim in this book is to fill these gaps by exploring the dynamics of being a religious none in contemporary America and Canada and how this willful distance from organized religion affects other aspects of daily and social life. Our main argument is that there is a decline of organized religion happening in both countries: a gradual decline happening in stages across time and generations and at different rates in various social, cultural, and regional contexts, leading to the rise of religious “nones.” Yet, this form of decline does not imply the disappearance of all things religious and spiritual, as a diversity of spiritual beliefs and practices along with nonbelief and secular attitudes coexist and are constantly evolving. The decline of organized religion among large segments of the US and Canadian populations also does not mean that religion is necessarily less relevant for everyday interactions and social life. If anything, that there are now large groups of religious and nonreligious individuals coexisting in both countries could mean there is a greater social divide and distance in moral and political values and behaviors along religious/nonreligious lines, as well as in interactions and attitudes between the religious and nonreligious.

We arrive at these conclusions upon carefully examining several data sources. Sarah analyzed quantitative data from a number of

We also draw upon thirty face-to-face interviews that Joel conducted with religious nones in Alberta, Canada. These interviews occurred between June 2012 and August 2013, as part of a larger study that compared active religious affiliates (those who identify with a Christian tradition and attend religious services nearly every week), marginal religious affiliates (those who identify with a Christian tradition and attend religious services mainly for religious holidays and rites of passage), and religious nones (see Thiessen 2015). A snowball sample resulted in semi-structured interviews with seventeen females and thirteen males, spread fairly evenly across three age groups (18–34, 35–54, and 55+). Interviews lasted from 24 to 100 minutes long, with most taking around one hour. Questions centered on a wide range of past, present, and possible future (ir)religious perspectives and experiences, as well as views on the role of religion in society (see appendix A). In this book we focus on material from these interviews not fully analyzed or developed in our previous writing. As we develop our ideas, we additionally turn to excellent qualitative research with religious nones in the United States, sometimes to reinforce insights from our Canadian-based interviews and other times to show how religious nones might be different between the two nations.

In building our main argument throughout this book, we give special attention to similarities and differences between religious nones in the United States and Canada, accounting for the distinct historical, cultural, and religious landscapes in each nation and its regions. We begin this task in this introductory chapter by examining current-day rates of nones in American and Canadian regions, how these numbers have evolved since the 1970s, their demographic composition, and the major
frameworks used in sociology of religion and religious studies that attempt to understand and explain the religious none phenomenon.

Past and Present Nones in the United States and Canada

In some respects, religious nones in the United States and Canada have followed similar trajectories, from once constituting relatively small proportions in each country to more sizeable figures in recent decades. Figures in 2016 among adults in the United States show that an estimated 22% say they have no religion (based on our analyses of the 2016 US General Social Survey (GSS); see also Pew Research Center 2015). This figure is up from 5% in 1972, with slow and gradual growth up to 7% in 1980 and 8% in 1990, and then the more recent and sudden jumps to 14% in 2000 and 22% in 2016 (US GSS 1972–2016; see also Pew Research Center 2015; Sherkat 2014, 37). Similar trends are noted among American teens and young adults. In 1972, 10% of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds reported that they had no religion, a figure that rose to 32% by 2016 among this younger age group (US GSS 1972–2016; see also Lipka 2015; Putnam and Campbell 2010, 122–23). In Canada, 2016 General Social Survey data revealed that an estimated 23% of residents declared they have no religion (based on our analyses of this data). This figure is an increase from below 1% in the 1950s and 4% in the 1971 census. Since then, Canada overall has witnessed progressive growth to 12% in the 1991 census and 17% in the 2001 census (based on our analyses of these censuses; see also Bibby, Russell, and Rolheiser 2009, 176; Clarke and Macdonald 2017). Once again, similar trends are noted among Canadian teens and young adults: in the 1971 census, 6% of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds disclosed they had no religion, a figure that has risen to 34% by 2016 among this younger age group.

It is important to note that the growth of religious nones in Canada started earlier than in the United States, though in the last decade this growth has plateaued somewhat in Canada, and growth in the United States has accelerated to catch up (see figure I.1; see also Brown 2013 for a comparison with other Western countries). A stages of decline framework is a helpful way to understand the varied developments in both countries. Part of our task in this book is to address several historical, social, and cultural explanations that assist us in understanding both
why the growth of religious nones started earlier in Canada and why this growth did not start until later in the United States. But to begin, it is valuable to examine four key reasons that help to explain the extensive rise of religious nones during this period of time across the United States and Canada, reasons that in some cases are distinctly situated in American or Canadian social contexts and narratives.

**Greater Social Acceptability toward the Nonreligious**

First, it has become socially acceptable to say that one has no religion. With both nations emerging from strong Christian roots, until relatively recently for someone to say they had no religion was to risk social stigma in the eyes of their family, friends, coworkers, and society. In Canada, where more people attended religious services regularly compared with Americans during the mid-twentieth century (Bibby 1987,
17; Bowen 2004, 13; Noll 1992, 548), the onset of diminished religiosity from the 1960s forward opened the space for religious none identification to gradually become normalized (see Clarke and Macdonald 2017). This normalization process would be delayed in the United States and, as will be seen, is a process still very much underway. What partially sets Canada and the United States apart in this regard is their historical narratives surrounding the place of religion, notably Christianity, in social life. As is well documented, Evangelicalism is the single largest faith group in America, and it along with a civil religion discourse that sacralizes historical symbols, figures, and narratives around a Christian ethos has had and continues to have a strong influence in American social and political life (Bean 2014; Reimer 2003; Smith 1998). Whether it is the narrative that America is (or was) a Christian nation, beliefs that tie America with Israel as God’s chosen people, or expectations that laws conform to conservative Christian values, there is a strong undercurrent of American Evangelicalism that dominates much of American social life. This sizeable Evangelical subculture, history, and memory in the United States, not present in Canada, has served as a buffer against the earlier growth of religious nones in the United States versus Canada. For example, a fervent stigma still exists in some regions toward those in the religious none community in the United States (see Schmidt 2016). Research likens “coming out” as a religious none, especially for atheists, in some areas within the United States to processes and experiences of those who “come out” as gay, lesbian, or transgender (Cragun et al. 2012; Linneman and Clendenen 2010; Niose 2012; Williamson and Yancey 2013; Zimmerman et al. 2015).

This social and historical context does not exist in Canada. While Canadians are generally aware of and even sympathetic to Christianity’s influence in Canada’s formative years, and in some laws that remain today, Canadians have become far more progressive and liberal over time on a range of social and moral issues. These social changes are related to a combination of changed and weakened ethnic-religious ties (English-Protestant and French-Catholic) following World War II, the growing centrality of multiculturalism to Canadian identity since the 1970s, and the relative absence of a strong conservative religious subculture as that found in the United States to fight against and delay liberal-leaning changes on social and moral issues (Adams 2006; Reimer 2003).
As just one example when comparing Americans and Canadians, 32% of Americans maintain that an atheist is unfit for political office versus 18% of Canadians, and fewer than half of Americans would vote for an atheist president (Bibby 2011, 92–94). Within a more permissive Canadian cultural milieu, rather than stigmatizing religious none identification, there is a sense among some that the stigma is reserved in part for those who are overly religious (see Haskell 2010; Thiessen 2015). In many ways, Canadian skepticism toward those who are too religious can be linked to illustrations and connotations of American Evangelicalism that Canadians are exposed to in the media, the subject of our second substantive observation.

**A Reaction to the Religious Right**

In 2018, Joel attended a gathering of Evangelical leaders in the United States. One of the church leaders recalled a debate in their church over whether to have the American flag on the platform under the cross on the wall, or off the platform. Neither of us can imagine such a debate taking place in a Canadian church, or even to have a Canadian flag present at all in a church (or if so, this would be extremely rare). The presence or absence of a national flag in a religious building is reflective, in part, of the ties between religion and politics in these two nations.

The robust political and media presence of the Christian Right and religious fundamentalism in the United States initially helped to delay the rise of religious nones in this country versus Canada yet has been, paradoxically, influential to the rapid rise of religious nones over the last three decades (Baker and Smith 2009; Clydesdale 2007, 196–97; Hout and Fischer 2002, 168; Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006, 15; Kinnaman and Hawkins 2011; Niose 2012; Putnam and Campbell 2010, 499–501; Zuckerman 2012). In short, many see what in their minds is the problematic fusion between religion and politics, namely, between Evangelical Christianity and the Republican Party. For instance, 81% of white Evangelicals voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 American election (Smith and Martinez 2016). A growing segment of the American population believes that Evangelicals have too much power and influence in the political arena—imposing their values and expected behaviors onto others who think or act differently—with broad sweeping
influences over family, education, the healthcare system, the legal realm, and foreign policy. Moreover, there is a sense that Evangelicals are too political, judgmental, insincere, exclusive, homophobic, hypocritical, and sheltered (Kinnaman and Hawkins 2011)—traits unbecoming of a modern, democratic, liberal, and diverse society. American political scientists Robert Putnam and David Campbell (2010), and sociologists Michael Hout and Claude Fischer (2002), argue that the Christian Right emerged politically in the 1980s as a reaction to the flourishing liberal sexual morals of the 1960s and 1970s. In turn the sudden rise of religious nones in the United States since the 1990s has been a counterreaction to the Christian Right and religious fundamentalism there.

While Canada has not experienced the overarching presence of Evangelicalism in public life to the extent felt in the United States, ordinary Canadians are not immune from such effects. Canadians consume American media, and many are well aware of the role that Evangelicalism plays in American society, and indications of religion playing a central role in Canadian life are viewed with a certain degree of suspicion (Bean 2014; Reimer 2003; Reimer and Wilkinson 2015). A 2015 Angus Reid survey reveals that religious nones in Canada have the strongest negative perceptions toward Evangelicals, and not coincidentally, Evangelicals have the strongest disdain for atheists. Suffice it to say, as it relates to religious nones in Canada, some, following their American counterparts, attribute their decision to identify as a religious none to their disdain toward the public presence of religion in the world (not just Evangelicalism but religious extremism in general).

**Apostasy**

Third, to this point in American and Canadian history, apostasy has been the driving source and background for most of those who say they have no religion. A large majority of Canadians and Americans through the 1950s identified with a Christian tradition or denomination. Although there are religious nones from a variety of Christian and non-Christian faith backgrounds, the rise of nones is attributable in large part to those who set aside their Christian identification, especially among mainline or liberal Protestant groups (Bibby 2011; Clarke and Macdonald 2017; Sherkat 2014). Some members from other traditions have also left their
religious identification behind, though far fewer than from Christianity (Drescher 2016, 16–17; Pew Research Center 2015; Sherkat 2014). Some recent qualitative research studies give us a glimpse into the reasons for apostasy. These range, among other factors, from Christianity being too exclusive to scandals and hypocrisy, negative experiences with others in their religious group, and intellectual disagreements (see Drescher 2016; Manning 2015; Thiessen 2015; Zuckerman 2012). Regardless of the reasons, the current religious none population across the United States and Canada is predominantly comprised of individuals raised in some kind of faith tradition but who left their religious involvement and identification behind. According to the 2008 US GSS, 56% of religious none Americans had two parents (or in the case of a single parent household, had only the one parent) with a religious affiliation when the respondent was growing up. In Canada in 2005, 55% of religious none respondents expressed their parents were religiously affiliated at the time of the survey (based on our analyses of the 2005 Project Canada Survey). A majority of religious nones in both countries then seem to emerge from homes where parents identify with a religion.

**Growing Irreligious Socialization**

Last, a trend that we are seeing and anticipate will become more common is those who are raised without any religion. As the religious none population has grown in recent decades, it is more common for children to be born into families with parents who say they have no religion. In contrast to previous generations where parents may be nominally or actively religious and provide their children with some exposure to religious beliefs and rituals, religious nones today who may have little or no religious background themselves are raising their children without any formal exposure to religious beliefs or behaviors in the home, at school, and in the community (Bengtson, Putney, and Harris 2013; Clarke and Macdonald 2017; Manning 2015; Thiessen 2016; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2017). If we return to the figures at the end of the previous section, 44% of religious nones in the United States come from homes where one or both parents similarly identify as religious nones versus 45% in Canada. Irreligious socialization should thus not be lost as one of the contributing factors to the rise of nones across the United States and Canada.
Regional Variations in Nones

Although there is a similar process of decline of organized religion and rise of religious nones underway in both Canada and the United States, the timing, rate, and sometimes nature of this change does vary between the two national contexts. These variables can also differ between regional cultures within and between both countries. In figures I.2 and I.3, we first show the regional variations of proportional none increases since the 1970s. In the United States, religious none figures are highest along the entire West Coast moving eastward into the mountain states, and to a lesser degree in the Northeast. In Canada, religious none populations follow a similar pattern and are also highest on the West Coast, in the northern territories, and in Alberta. In comparison, the nones form the smallest proportions of the overall
populations in the midwestern and southern US states as well as in Quebec and the Atlantic Canadian provinces.

Regarding the evolution of rates of religious nones across the four US Census regions and the six Canadian Census regions, two patterns stand out. First, in every region the rates of nones have steadily increased over time. In the United States, the religious none figures have grown from their lowest points, between 3% in the South and 7% in the West in 1972, up to 17% and 28% respectively in 2016. In Canada, statistics range from 2% in Quebec and 13% in British Columbia in 1971, up to 13% and 41% respectively in 2016.

Second, the most and least religious regions across the United States and Canada (measured here strictly by affiliation status) remain stable.
over time, with some fluctuation among regions in the middle. The West Coast states in America have long had the highest rates of religious nones along with British Columbia in Canada, while the southern states in America along with Quebec and the Atlantic provinces in Canada have consistently had the lowest rates of religious nones. Historical and cultural factors play a large role in these distinctions (Block 2017; Martin 2005; Meunier and Wilkins-Laflamme 2011).

Demographics among the Nones

Shifting our focus to figure I.4 and the demographic composition among religious nones in the United States and Canada, several clear patterns arise that extend a growing consensus among scholars who study religious nones (many of the following findings are even more pronounced among atheists—see Cragun, Hammer, and Smith 2013; Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale 2016). First, religious nones are disproportionately younger than those who affiliate with a religion, a finding that is slightly more pronounced in Canada than in the United States. In the United States, 44% of religious nones are under the age of thirty-five versus 49% in Canada. Second, religious nones are more likely to be male when compared to those affiliated with a religion, representing 54% of nones in the United States and 57% in Canada. Third, in comparison with those affiliated with a religion, religious nones are less likely to be foreign born. When contrasting the United States and Canada, Canadian nones are more likely to be born outside the country (18%), compared with American nones (12%).

It would seem then that, although there are religious nones of all stripes, the processes leading to their growth are more prevalent among certain subpopulations, notably younger generations, men, and those born in the United States and Canada (and Northern and Western Europe). If we narrow our focus only to religious nones between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four years in order to control for the age effect to a certain extent, several additional observations emerge. Religious nones are less likely to be married when compared with those who identify with a religion. This fact is most pronounced in the United States (45% of nones have never married) versus Canada (31%). Relatedly, religious nones are less likely than affiliated individuals to have children, reflective
Figure 1.4.A. Demographic composition of religious nones, USA and Canada, 2010–2014 averages. Source: 2010–2014 USA and CND GSSs. Estimates weighted to be representative of the general populations. N USA 18 year + respondents = 6,556; N CND 15 year + respondents = 118,763.

of 43% of both American and Canadian nones. Traditional family structures, taught and valued by most organized religious groups, thus seem to be less present among religious nones.

Somewhat surprisingly though, when it comes to university education, rural contexts, or visible minority status, no discernable differences emerge between the affiliated and the unaffiliated. In both Canada and the United States, almost as many religious nones are university educated, live in rural settings, or are visible minorities as those who affiliate with a religion. Small exceptions to this include education in the United States, with a slight edge among religious nones with a university education (34% versus 30% among the affiliated) and rural populations in Canada where 15% of the affiliated live versus 12% of religious nones.

Frameworks for Understanding Nones

Those scholars studying religion have framed their analyses and interpretations of these realities of the religious nones in several ways. There are three notable and commonly used conceptual and theoretical frameworks for studying religious nones: stages of decline, individualization, and polarization. While we favor a stages of decline interpretive framework, we see merit in each for helping to describe and explain different aspects of what is to be known about religious nones in the United States and Canada. Thus, each of the chapters in this book draws on aspects of these three frameworks in turn.

Stages of Decline

Beginning with the stages of decline framework, the relatively recent surge of religious nones is understood here to be a consequence of long-standing, progressive, and generational religious decline over time. As prominent Scottish sociologist Steve Bruce (2002, xii) puts it, “Liberal industrial democracies of the Western world are considerably less religious now than they were in the days of my father, my grandfather, and my great-grandfather.” Against this backdrop, the growing presence of religious nones is not a sudden or surprising social development. The late sociologists Peter Berger (1967) and David Martin (1978) initially
articulated this narrative best, alerting researchers to the powerful relationship between modernity and religious decline. Instead of suggesting that secularization is inevitable or irreversible in modern society, they suggest rather that it unfolds at different speeds and in different ways due to historical and cultural factors. Berger and Martin draw attention to social changes that link religious decline at the societal, organizational, and individual levels (see Dobbelaere 1981, 2002), changes such as rationalization, improved material conditions, pluralism, individualism, and declining religious authority in the public sphere. In the last decade, scholars like Bruce (2011), Clarke and Macdonald (2017), Norris and Inglehart (2011), Voas (2006, 2009), and Voas and Chaves (2016) have extended this stages of decline framework, drawing on extensive survey and institutional data across the modern Western world. Bruce (2002, 3) aptly notes “the declining importance of religion for the operation of nonreligious roles and institutions such as those of the state and the economy; a decline in the social standing of religious roles and institutions; and a decline in the extent to which people engage in religious practices, display beliefs of a religious kind, and conduct other aspects of their lives in a manner informed by such beliefs.”

The Enlightenment era, characterized by rationalization, science, and empiricism, is a helpful starting point for considering the stages of decline process because of the supposed inherent conflict between modernity and religious belief in the unmeasurable. As a rationalistic and scientific worldview gains legitimacy in society, religiosity tends to diminish, given its fundamentally different ontology and epistemology; people no longer believe they need the gods to keep them safe or heal them or grow their crops when they can turn to science and medicine instead. Similarly, in the area of material security, people’s perceived need for the supernatural diminishes the greater their economic standing; people do not need compensators, in this life or the next, from the gods to deal with their current economic depravity. A related variable in the stages of decline framework is social and religious pluralism (see Berger 1967; Bruce 2011; Woodhead 2016). Where pluralism exists, it is rare and difficult for any one religion to receive a privileged or taken-for-granted status in society, to shape politics, healthcare, or education, for instance. Religion is but one of many social institutions with specialized roles and functions in a differentiated society. The result is that
religion lacks social relevance to reinforce certain religious plausibility structures and beliefs and practices. In this context, political leaders, teachers, and healthcare professionals do not advance ideologies or act on behalf of a religious group. Further, in a religiously and culturally plural society, individuals become aware of perspectives that are different from their own. This awareness can create the conditions for weakening the legitimacy of one's religious beliefs, sometimes resulting in doubt over one's religious worldview. The combined effect of these realities where pluralism exists is subjectivized faith. Here individuals turn inward as the arbiter and authority over their religious beliefs and practices, somewhat devoid of a shared religious framework. Canadian researcher Alastair Hay (2014) recently offered a compelling case that Berger’s theory of secularization, notably pluralism, individualism, and science and rationalization, helps to explain secularizing trends in Canada.

At a very practical level, the stages of decline framework reveals that individuals initially diminish their religiosity by gradually dropping their church attendance and religious group activities. Their religious identification and occasional involvement with a religious group may persist (e.g., for religious holidays or rites of passage), as people maintain social and cultural ties to their faith tradition (Bibby and Grenville 2013; Clarke and Macdonald 2017; Day 2011; Demerath 2000; Inglis 2007; Lamoureux Scholes 2003; Meunier and Wilkins-Laflamme 2011; Thiessen 2015; Voas 2009; Walliss 2002; Zuckerman 2008). Yet these ties to one’s religion also progressively lessen given that one has fewer social reinforcements in society or their religious group to sustain ongoing affiliation, belief, or involvement. Simply put, as religion loses its influence in society, the social pressures to uphold religiosity at a private level, with involvement in institutional religion or otherwise, also weaken. And this dynamic is circular. As fewer people say they identify or are involved with a religious group, the social acceptance toward such a declaration increases, which in turn normalizes the “no religion” option for others in society. This process is aided when those with little religiosity have children of their own and raise their children without explicit religious socialization. It is unlikely in these circumstances for people to suddenly “take up” religious affiliation or belief, if for no other reason than they lack the social environments (e.g., family, education, politics, and media) to
expose or teach them about such options (Bengtson, Putney, and Harris 2013; Clarke and Macdonald 2017; Dillon and Wink 2007; Manning 2013; Merino 2012; Zuckerman 2012).

As this process unfolds, researchers in secular and nonreligion studies have begun to focus not just on the decline of traditional forms of religion but more specifically on what is replacing them among cohorts of nonbelievers. Burgeoning research is just now beginning to provide a more substantive understanding of how nonbelievers construct and make sense of their world as well as their various attitudes and behaviors in societies where they must coexist with believers (Ammerman 2014; Beaman and Tomlins 2015; Bullivant and Lee 2012; LeDrew 2015; Lee 2015; Taylor 2007; Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale 2016). Since many religious nones also do not hold to traditional religious or spiritual beliefs, we will explore these emerging findings on unbelief in more detail with our own results in the chapters to come.

**Individualization and Spiritualization**

In contrast to the stages of decline framework, where researchers focus on declining institutional expressions of religious affiliation, belief, and practice, some say that religion and spirituality are not necessarily declining but rather changing (e.g., Bowen 2004; Davie 1994; Drescher 2016; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Houtman and Aupers 2007; Miller 1997; Wuthnow 2007). Rather than narrowly defining and measuring religion against conventional institutional markers, such as church attendance or communal-oriented religious activities, the individualization framework stresses ongoing private spirituality among individuals. For example, this can include belief in a god, supernatural being, or higher power; belief in an interconnected natural world and universe; and belief in some form of afterlife, prayer, meditation, or mindfulness activities. Individuals draw on a number of beliefs, rituals, and practices from a variety of sources, some of them linked to religious groups and some of them not, to build and maintain their own personalized faith systems (Hervieu-Léger 1999).

And yet a parallel case to this narrative is a sense among some scholars that expressions of spirituality apart from institutionalized religion do not necessarily entail wholly private spiritual quests. In *Sacred Stories, Spiritual*


*Tribes*, American sociologist Nancy Ammerman (2014) draws attention to the nuanced ways in which individuals, particularly those with weak or no ties to institutional religion, invoke the sacred in the ordinary, from life at home to work, relationships, and health. For such individuals, spirituality is not strictly an individualized endeavor. Ammerman contends that spiritual practices are “neither utterly individual or strictly defined by collective tradition . . . people draw on practices that they learn about from others, both inside and outside traditional religious communities; and occasionally they come up with something genuinely new” (290). In turn, Ammerman urges sociologists to think about the Durkheimian sacred-profane distinction along a continuum rather than in dichotomous terms; the boundaries between the two are much fuzzier than many assume (see also Day, Vincett, and Cotter 2013; Lee 2015).

Although not explicitly stated among proponents of the individualization framework, an argument could be made that individualization is a manifestation of individualism within the stages of decline framework. That is, religious, social, and cultural pluralism help to set in motion the movement away from institutionalized religion toward more subjective expressions of spirituality. This social transformation specifically occurs as societies gradually embrace individualism, personal autonomy, and choice as prized cultural values. British scholar of religion Linda Woodhead (2016), writing in the context of Britain, captures this shift well when she speaks of the “liberalization” of society. By this she means “the conviction that each and every individual has the right if not the duty to make choices about how she or he should live her or his own life” (255). As it relates to religion, this turn happens from authority that was once widely located externally in a deity or a religious leader to one now resting largely with the individual. This means that people can and do embrace the cultural freedom to believe or belong on their own terms, including the freedom to say that one has no religion. This narrative is increasingly accepted across the United States and Canada, though as hinted at earlier, the social costs for doing so remain higher for Americans versus Canadians.

**Polarization**

The polarization framework is another way of making sense of religious nones in contemporary social life. In its broadest sense, polarization
refers to the widening gap between those who are actively religious (i.e., identify with a religion and attend religious services on a regular basis) and those who do not identify with any religion and score low on all or most religiosity scales. Implicit in this account is the shrinking middle category of individuals who may, for example, identify with a religion and attend religious services for religious holidays and rites of passage but do not position themselves at either extreme of the religious-irreligious continuum (see Bibby 2011; Olson and Beckworth 2011; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Wilkins-Laflamme 2014).

Emerging research is showing that, in areas where religious decline has been underway for a longer period of time, a bottoming out has occurred where there is a small but stable core of religiously active individuals that remains (Kaufmann, Goujon, and Skirbekk 2012; Voas 2009; Wilkins-Laflamme 2014; 2016a). Despite finding themselves in a landscape where secular values and behaviors are normalized, this demographic still values the rewards attached to their faithful religious adherence and involvement. Religion thus becomes more of a niche market of sorts in society, with the actively faithful being able to reproduce their numbers at these now lower levels due to their sometimes higher fertility rates and most notably due to gains from non-Western immigration. Some faith groups, notably Evangelicals, are also adept at creating and maintaining their own alternative social activities and institutions for their members. Meanwhile, the rest of society moves more and more in a secular direction. In this sense, the polarization framework can be understood within the stages of decline narrative, only that religious decline does not necessarily touch everyone in society.

There is, however, another element to polarization that scholars deal with in their research on religious nones: an antagonistic and hostile relationship between the actively religious and irreligious in society. Recent research (Wilkins-Laflamme 2016b) highlights sharpened attitudinal and behavioral differences between the actively religious and irreligious, prominent especially in areas with a larger concentration of religious nones. Namely, religious nones tend to be more liberal (e.g., on issues of family life and sexuality) and less personally religious where advanced secularization is present. In their 2015 report on religion and
faith in Canada, opinion pollsters at Angus Reid found that 63% of respondents inclined to reject religion felt uncomfortable around people who are religiously devout, and 41% of respondents inclined to embrace religion felt uncomfortable around people who had no use for religion (Angus Reid Institute 2015). There is also some credence to sociologist José Casanova’s (1994) deprivatization thesis in such contexts, where the highly devout who reside in overwhelmingly secular settings may feel a need to hold on to or reassert their religious presence in the public realm (Achterberg et al. 2009; Wilkins-Laflamme 2016a). At the same time, religious nones may also push for greater cultural legitimacy, particularly at the expense of religion playing any substantive public role. Returning to Woodhead’s observations about liberalization and people’s belief that they have the right and duty to live, believe, and behave as they see fit, for religious nones this can mean the freedom from religion in society. Some religious nones maintain that in a plural and secular society, religion should have no role in public life, where religious groups and individuals cease imposing their attitudes and behaviors onto others. As one would imagine in a context like the United States, where there is a strong contingent of devout theologically conservative religious adherents alongside a growing religious none segment who are evermore committed to a secular orientation to society, a battle for cultural authority and legitimacy over and against the “other” is very much present.

Taken together, the stages of decline, individualization, and polarization frameworks, though distinct, are in some ways extensions of one another. The stages of decline framework sets in motion individualization taking place, and may in turn be reinforced by processes of individualization. As people become less religious and declines among the actively religious bottom out, it is not surprising that polarization between the highly devout and the irreligious emerge. Moreover, as once religious societies experience progressive secularization, religiously conservative individuals and groups will no doubt take issue with how society is changing. Similarly, as religious nones grow in proportion and social legitimacy, we also see them vie for a stronger cultural space, potentially to the exclusion of more religious folk. Yet even these realities of polarization are evidence of later stages of secularization at work.
Introduction

Mapping the Journey

To summarize, religious nones have “come out” and grown rapidly in a relatively short period of time across the United States and Canada. We are gradually learning more about this group’s demographic composition and how religious nones are similar or dissimilar from the rest of the population in both the United States and Canada. As already demonstrated in a preliminary way in this chapter, when studying religious nones in a comparative fashion, our understanding sharpens because we can identify and isolate social, cultural, and historical variations surrounding the rise and experience of religious nones. The remainder of our journey in this book is straightforward: we seek to better understand religious nones in contemporary America and Canada, and how nonreligious identification shapes other aspects of daily and social life.

In chapter 1 we turn to both qualitative and quantitative empirical data to explore the individual and demographic factors affecting rates of religious nones. Subjects include the prevalence of religious disaffiliation and the reasons individuals give for disaffiliation, irreligious socialization, more secular social environments, potential for reaffiliation, and birth rates and migration among religious and nonreligious populations.

Chapter 2 entails an investigation into the dynamics of believing, religious and spiritual behavior, indifference, and active atheism and secularism among the nonaffiliated, and how these dimensions among the nones compare between American and Canadian regions. We explore in this chapter the diversity of spiritual beliefs and practices along with nonbelief and secular attitudes that coexist in society. More specifically, we explore five subtypes of religious nones in the United States and Canada: involved seculars, inactive nonbelievers, inactive believers, the spiritual but not religious, and religiously involved believers.

Equipped with a better understanding of the diversity present among American and Canadian religious nones, we turn our attention in chapters 3 and 4 to the broader social and civic impact of religious nones in American and Canadian social life. We explore the extent to which a gulf exists regarding many moral and political values and behaviors between the religious and nonreligious. In chapter 3 with both survey and in-depth interview data, we highlight how being a specific subtype of religious none in both the United States and Canada can be linked
with certain values and positions on issues of sexuality, reproductive rights, gender roles, governmental aid, environmentalism, and immigration. Then in chapter 4 we study the levels of political and civic engagement that are present among religious none populations and how these compare with those who are affiliated and more actively involved with a religion.

In chapter 5 we turn our attention to American and Canadian public opinion data as well as data from qualitative interviews with nones to determine to what extent there is dislike, indifference, apprehension, or respect among nones toward individuals affiliated with various religious traditions. Further, we examine attitudes and perceptions among affiliates from different religious groups toward religious nones. In other words, this chapter looks at the levels of social distance that exist between nones and members of religious groups in the United States and Canada, and what impact this is having on interactions between both types of individuals.

We then end this book by offering some central conclusions from our research in the context of our main argument laid out earlier in this introduction. We discuss the features of late modernity as a way to help make sense of our central observations regarding religious nones in the United States and Canada. We then distill some of the similarities and differences between religious nones in the United States and Canada, before exploring the possible future, quantitatively and qualitatively, for religious nones in both countries, including potential challenges and opportunities for coexistence among the affiliated and unaffiliated. In doing so, we give careful attention to national and regional variations in play, as well as theoretical and methodological considerations. Last, we raise a number of possibilities for future research on religious nones in the United States, Canada, and further afield.