Introduction

\textit{A Nation of Nonbelievers}

There are more individuals who consider themselves “not religious” living in the United States than in any other nation in the world except China. This fact stands in stark contrast to declarations that America is a fervently religious or Christian nation. The numeric magnitude of secularity in the U.S. is generally overlooked because there are many countries, particularly in Western Europe and East Asia, where the proportion of secularists in the population is higher. For instance, in 2011, 28% of American respondents to the World Values Survey (WVS) said that they were “not . . . religious person[s]” or were atheists, and also that they attended religious services infrequently or not at all.\textsuperscript{1} Many other countries included in the same wave of the WVS had a higher proportion of respondents who said they were not religious or were atheists, including Australia (56%), China (87%), Germany (47%), Japan (70%), the Netherlands (54%), New Zealand (51%), Russia (38%), South Korea (57%), Spain (58%), and Sweden (66%). Earlier waves of the survey also found a higher proportion of secular individuals in locations such as France (52%) and Great Britain (49%). Such comparative analyses have led many scholars to designate the U.S. as “exceptionally” religious relative to other postindustrial nations.\textsuperscript{2}

There is certainly some validity to this claim, proportionally speaking. At the same time, portraying the U.S. as exceptionally religious obscures the many millions of Americans who are not religious. In recent years, however, secularism in the U.S. has been making headlines and receiving more attention due to a rapid increase in the number and proportion of Americans who are secular. For example, in the first wave of the WVS, collected in the U.S. in 1981, 8% of respondents answered that they were not religious persons or were atheists, and also that they infrequently attended religious services. The 1995 (15%) and 1999 waves
(13%) showed a substantial increase in secularity. In the 2006 wave, the percentage jumped to 22%, then rose again to 28% in 2011. Figure I.1 shows this increase of 3.5 times in the proportion of the population that is secular over a thirty-year span.3

Reflecting the rising numeric prominence and cultural awareness of secular Americans, Barack Obama declared during his first inaugural address that the United States is “a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and non-believers.” 4 The rhetorical apex of Obama’s speech was an effort to recast the civil religious nationalism of the U.S. as a more inclusive, cosmopolitan national identity.5 In the period between 1980 and 2008, American presidential rhetoric had moved away from cosmopolitanism and toward particularistic religious nationalism, culminating in the explicitly religious post-9/11 rhetoric of George W. Bush, which emphasized America’s exceptional, God-ordained role and destiny in global affairs using dualisms such as freedom/tyranny, good/evil, and us/them.6 In contrast with his predecessor, Obama dissociated such dualisms—one of his primary rhetorical techniques.

The inaugural mention of nonbelievers was a remarkable moment.7 Not that the politics of secularism are new. Quite the contrary. For example, the list of Americans who have used some variety of secular philosophy as a foundation from which to build lasting political and cultural legacies is long and distinguished—from Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, through Thomas Edison and Mark Twain, to A. Philip Randolph and Carl Sagan.8 Indeed, historians and philosophers have recently reemphasized the influence of freethought traditions on the foundational ideas of the American republic, as well as on globalized ideas about democracy and civil liberties.9 Yet, in spite of the influence of secular traditions on American culture, widespread public recognition of the importance of such traditions remained elusive, particularly in the post–World War II era.

In national communications by American presidents to the public from Franklin Roosevelt to George W. Bush, secularists were rarely mentioned. Further, Gerald Ford’s mention of atheists in a 1974 speech to Congress in the immediate wake of assuming the presidency after the Watergate scandal was the only instance where secularists were not discussed in a context of condemnation. Ford said of atheists at the close of his speech:
To the limits of my strength and ability, I will be the President of black, brown, red, and white Americans, of old and young, of women’s liberationists and male chauvinists—and all the rest of us in-between, of the poor and the rich, of native sons and new refugees, of those who work at lathes or at desks or in mines or in the fields, of Christians, Jews, Moslems, Buddhists, and atheists, if there really are any atheists after what we have all been through. Fellow Americans, one final word: I want to be a good President. I need your help. We all need God’s sure guidance. With it, nothing can stop the United States of America. Thank you very much.¹⁰

This qualified, begrudging acknowledgment that secularists were indeed American citizens (but also at the outer limits of tolerance), followed by a reminder to listeners that we “all need God’s sure guidance,” was hardly a ringing endorsement of secularity. Yet this was still the most positive mention of secularity in presidential rhetoric in the twentieth century. Acknowledging secularists as worthy of respect in one of the
most highly anticipated and watched presidential speeches in history made Obama’s inaugural comments about nonbelievers all the more noteworthy, especially considering that even highly secularized threads of nationalist discourse still reference generalized theism, particularly in inaugural speeches.\footnote{11}

Although the symbolic recognition offered in the inaugural speech was a milestone, secularists remain among the most distrusted groups in the United States. When the 2003 American Mosaic Survey asked whether members of specific groups shared respondents’ “vision of America,” a much higher proportion answered “not at all” when asked about atheists and nonbelievers (37\%) compared to other religious groups and racial and ethnic minorities. By comparison, 21\% said “not at all” when asked about “homosexuals.” A similar pattern is present regarding whether people would approve or disapprove of their child marrying someone of a particular social category. Again, nonbelievers were the most disliked, outpacing Muslims and racial/ethnic minorities. Over half (51\%) of religiously affiliated Americans reported that they would disapprove of their child marrying an atheist or nonbeliever, compared to roughly one third of non-Muslims disapproving of their child marrying a Muslim. Acceptance for the nonreligious remains rare, even relative to other “othered” groups in American society.\footnote{12}

At the same time, the rhetorical inclusion of secularity in a list of the world’s most prominent religious traditions marks a dramatic shift in the religious composition of the U.S. (and the Western world more generally) over the past half century. Although secularism remains strongly othered, recent generations of Americans are more accepting of, and more likely to be, secular. What is the meaning of this transformation? Naturally, the answer depends on whom you ask. Many religious believers see the trend as evidence that America has fallen away from its moral values, while many secularists see it as evidence of increasing enlightenment and rationality.\footnote{13} Meanwhile, some social scientists have claimed that the trend reflects measurement error rather than an actual increase in secularity.\footnote{14} We see it as none of these things. Instead, we view changes to American secularism as reflective of a shift in the political meanings of “religion” in American culture.

Our goal is to provide an empirically rigorous, interpretively meaningful, and ethically evenhanded portrait of secular individuals.
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Although the trope of “objectivity” is common enough in official presentations of methodology by social scientists, the implementation of these ideals is often lacking in practice, particularly in studies of both religion and secularism. As we will see, the acuity of this problem inheres in our intellectual origins. Developing better frameworks for understanding religion and secularism can be achieved only by a thoroughgoing commitment to presenting social phenomena as they are. This is no simple dictate or easy task. It requires sustained effort and attention to detail. As much as possible, we attempt to make our primary bias that of empiricists. Fully aware of the potential pitfalls and blind spots that accompany the rhetoric of neutral inquiry, we have nonetheless set out in this book to create an objective portrait of American secularism(s).

Background and Goals of the Study

While changing cultural responses to, and rates of, secularity have recently made high-profile headlines, the social and cultural dimensions of these consequential changes often remain poorly understood, particularly in four key areas: (1) the variety and complexity of expressions of...
secularity; (2) the implications of secularism for explanatory and interpretive theories “of religion”; (3) the historical, cultural, and political dimensions of secularities; and (4) the sociological patterns and consequences of various forms of secularity.\textsuperscript{15}

On the first count, even scholarly conceptions of secularism are only beginning to move beyond homogeneity, while public views often remain stereotypical and pejorative. Rather than being simply an issue of the absence of religious belief or affiliation, there are wide varieties of secular expression, ranging from passionate antipathy to tepid apathy, and also including the privatization of spiritual concerns and nominal religiosity. Indeed, there are as many “atheologies as theologies.”\textsuperscript{16} Cultural expressions at the borders of binary thinking about religion and secularity such as “implicit religion,” “believing but not belonging,” “spiritual but not religious,” and the like complicate these issues further. Mapping the diversity of secular expressions and conceptualizing secularisms as assertive worldviews in their own right, rather than merely negated reflections of religion, stands as a crucial challenge for better understanding secularity, and religiosity. Although criticism of religion is central to understanding secularism, restricting secularity solely to opposition to religion denies secularists’ potential for edifying identities and positive values, furthering the polemical claim that to be secular is necessarily to be immoral.\textsuperscript{17}

On the second count, a conceptual framework capable of integrating investigations of both religiosity and secularity is needed to advance theoretical and empirical knowledge in the multidisciplinary study of religion. Instead of a binary distinction, religiosity and secularity should be understood as poles of a continuum, ranging from thorough irreli-gion to zealotry. In order to conceptualize religiosity and secularity in this way, a broader organizing concept capable of housing each is required. We propose \textit{cosmic belief systems} as a concept capable of usefully integrating studies of religiosity and secularity. Further, we use the idea of relational social status—where and how a person is “positioned” relative to others she interacts with—as the basis from which to understand both religiosity and secularity. Rich traditions of interactionist and cultural sociology provide a ready-made platform for such work, along with related work in political science, anthropology, communications, psychology, and other disciplines.\textsuperscript{18} The key is to connect these pursuits to empirical studies of religion and secularism.
These conceptual reformations provide the groundwork for the third theme, connecting contemporary secularities to history, politics, and culture more broadly. As we noted, wide recognition of the historical realities of secular traditions is often surface at best, even among secularists. Tracing the history and influence of secular organizations and individuals not only enriches our understanding of the past, it illuminates many of the contemporary issues involving secularism. Even scant engagements with histories of secularism reveal the importance of interactive connections to both organized religion and politics. While the specifics of these dynamics change over time and place, a full understanding of secularism requires viewing it in relation to religion and in political context. While this assertion is unlikely to provoke strong intellectual resistance, the corollary of understanding religion through its relation to secularism has, as far as we can see, few current advocates; but it is an important consideration that can open studies of religion to new insights. In essence, we advocate and practice approaching religion and secularism from a cultural perspective that foregrounds issues of politics and social context, regardless of the methods of inquiry used.

These considerations provide the foundation for our final theme: advancing an empirical understanding of secularism and secularities. Clarifying and classifying common forms of secularity is a primary step toward this goal, so in this book we outline a basic typology of secularities found in the contemporary U.S.: atheism, agnosticism, nonaffiliated belief, and cultural religion. Using this categorization scheme, we provide detailed, empirical information about different expressions of secularity. We also dissect the increase in secularity in the U.S. over the last forty years, providing explanations for these changes that are grounded in empirical data. We draw on multiple data sources collected with the intent of representing the general population of American adults. Most centrally we use the General Social Surveys (1972–2012) and the Pew Religious Landscape Survey (2007), but we also use a variety of other data sources where needed. Further information on our central data sources is available in the appendix at the end of the book, and tabled results of analyses supporting the information presented in the text of chapters can be found in the Data Analyses Appendix, available at http://nyupress.org/americansecularism-appendix.pdf.
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While important, analyses of general patterns and themes of secularity can go only so far. Like religion, at root secularity boils down to the narratives people tell about how we got here, who we are, “how the world works,” and what, if anything, lies beyond what we can directly observe. To bring out the narrative dimensions of secularities, we listen to and retell the stories of Lester Ward, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Frances Wright, as well as contemporary Americans openly engaged in matters of secularism in the public sphere. We also pay close attention to how secularity is understood and discussed in public discourse, particularly in relation to political dimensions of inclusion and exclusion.

To avoid the confusion that surrounds the multiplicity of uses for many of the terms we use throughout the book, some basic clarification on terminology is necessary. Below is a list of terms we use, along with the intended meaning we assign to them. We outline the definition of specific views such as atheism and agnosticism in the next chapter.

Secular—a general designation for people, organizations, or institutions that are not religious.
Nonreligion—a general term that incorporates multiple expressions of secularism and secularity under a broader concept. Nonreligion is “anything which is primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion.”
Secularity—social status or personal identity built on nonreligious assumptions.
Belief system—a constellation of interrelated beliefs. We use “belief system” and “ideology” interchangeably, but prefer “belief system” because “ideology” often carries negative connotations, which we do not intend. We also make the distinction of “cosmic” for belief systems concerned with basic facts about the nature of the universe and “how the world works.”
Secularism—cosmic belief system that is explicitly nonreligious in orientation.
Secularization—a process of change from religious to secular that can occur at individual, organizational, or institutional levels.
Irreligious—strongly, vocally opposed to religion; essentially a synonym for “anti-religious.” We avoid using this term except where directly applicable.

Regarding references, we have included a bibliography of theoretical, historical, and empirical work on secularism directly related to our study. Sources listed in the bibliography are cited in the endnotes by
author name and year of publication. Other sources not listed in the bibliography are cited with complete information in the endnotes.

Outline of the Book

Chapter 1 lays out some of the basic methodological considerations for our study, including a mutually exclusive typology of secular individuals: atheists, agnostics, nonaffiliated believers, and the culturally (nonpracticing) religious. We also distinguish between those raised in religious traditions who drop out as adults and those raised outside of organized religions who remain secular as adults. We then generate balanced estimates for levels of secularity using multiple data sources, showing how measurement can influence results.

Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical and conceptual framework we use throughout the book. The personal and professional narrative of Lester F. Ward, a pioneering American sociologist, provides a window into the long-standing assumptions of scholarly investigations of religion and secularism. Ward’s thought and narrative point to ideas that became taken for granted among academics regarding religion, science, and secularity. In contrast, we approach meaning-making both inside and outside of organized religion with tools provided by studies of culture, interaction, and cognition, conceptualizing secularities as both social statuses and cosmic belief systems.

Chapter 3 traces the historical development of secularism in the United States. By tracking the role of “freethought” in American public discourse from the late eighteenth century to the 1950s, the historical roots of contemporary secularity become more apparent. We focus on the impact of the early separation of church and state at the federal level, followed thereafter at state levels, detailing how the political and ideological context in which secularity exists shapes its concerns and organizational forms. To trace these histories we examine organizations and texts that were explicitly freethought in orientation. We carry these analyses to the Cold War era, during which the contrast between “religious America” and “godless communism” became the dominant cultural template for framing secularism in public discourse.

Chapter 4 places secularity in more recent historical context by expanding the view of secularism from that of “the platform” to that of “the
Beginning in the 1970s, advances in population surveys allow us to outline patterns of secularity among the general public rather than being confined to formal, publicly organized forms of secularism. We show how absolute numbers and relative proportions of secular Americans have changed over the past forty years. Generational changes to the social organization of family and sexuality have pushed against the familial traditionalism of organized religion, while divides over cultural issues and the overt use of religion as a political strategy have fueled increasing political polarization among Americans. This polarization parallels and has contributed to increasing levels of secularity. Overall, secularism has beaten demographic disadvantages in fertility to grow rapidly, thanks to a sharp rise in the apostasy rate among those raised religious coinciding with an increase in secular retention among those raised outside religion. All of these patterns are evident in trend data collected over time.

Chapter 5 outlines some specific ideological patterns among different categories of secularists, with attention to four areas: attitudes about organized religion and private spirituality, supernaturalism, life satisfaction and happiness, and views of science. Here we begin to add color and detail to the different categories of secularity. Levels of private spirituality, religious and paranormal supernaturalism, and scientism show distinct patterns between atheists, agnostics, nonaffiliated believers, and the culturally religious. We also use this chapter to address the question of whether and to what extent secularity correlates with self-rated levels of happiness and personal satisfaction. Overall, there is enough overlap and divergence to establish the utility of the typology for better understanding secularities.

Chapter 6 explores connections between secularity and some of the fundamental dimensions of power in American society, namely race and ethnicity, social class, and immigrant status. The dynamic life and thought of scholar and activist W. E. B. Du Bois helps illuminate some of the deeper connections between ethnicity, religion, and conventionality in American culture. In general, individuals occupying status positions with less power are less likely to be secular. There are subtleties to this tendency, such as the differential influence of increased educational attainment on supernatural belief (negative) and religious affiliation and practice (positive), but the tendency for those in less powerful positions
to be religious points toward an important cultural dimension of religiosity and secularity in the United States. To the extent that religion is linked to a person's normative status as a moral, civically engaged citizen, secularity becomes deviant, and therefore subject to accompanying social penalties. This dynamic shapes the patterns and expressions of secularity in crucial ways, and we use racial, ethnic, immigrant, and socioeconomic statuses as prisms through which to understand this aspect of American culture. We close the chapter by profiling the identity, experiences, and work of David Tamayo, a contemporary leader of a nonprofit group for Hispanic American freethinkers.

Chapter 7 examines how gender and sexuality relate to secularity. We critically assess the “gender gaps” in religiosity and secularity typically found in empirical studies of religion in Western countries. These gender gaps vary depending on the type of secularity in question. To dissect the reason for these gaps, we detail the interactive relationship between gender, educational attainment, and political views. This chapter also examines patterns of sexual orientation among the varying categories of secularists. These patterns reflect organized religion's role as the guardian of traditional morality—and therefore pathway to legitimacy (or perceived deviance)—in matters of gender and sexuality. We illustrate these themes through in-depth consideration of the life and thought of Frances Wright, a nineteenth-century philosopher, orator, and feminist.

Chapter 8 focuses on family structure, outlining patterns of family formation among American secularists, including rates of marriage, cohabitation, and parenting. We then examine the influences of childhood socialization and social networks—particularly parents, peers, and spouses—on expressions of secularity. As with patterns of religiosity, familial connections, socialization experiences, and social networks strongly influence secularity. In order to understand secularities as social statuses and identities, considerations of relational networks and the interactions that occur within those networks are central.

Chapter 9 focuses on the explicitly political dimensions of contemporary American secularisms. The narrative of Cecil Bothwell, an openly atheist member of the city council in Asheville, North Carolina, provides insight into narratives of secularity as well as some of the political dimensions of secularism. Tellingly, the growth in secularity in the population has not led to a parallel increase in secular political representa-
tives. Underrepresentation in the halls of power speaks to the continued ambivalence many Americans feel toward secularism due to its deviant designation, even as secularity has increased. In terms of political views and engagement among secularists, issues of gender and sexuality again come to the fore. This chapter closes by detailing the contemporary political landscape concerning secular Americans and examining the increasing presence of organized secular groups in the United States. The experiences of the first executive director of the Secular Coalition for America, Lori Lipman Brown, and the activities of three of the most prominent secular organizations—the American Humanist Association, American Atheists, and the Secular Student Alliance—show how changes to the political meaning of secularism and the growth of secularity are reflected in changes to organized secular groups.

In the conclusion, we provide an overview of our most important findings and discuss their implications for organized religious and secular groups. We also briefly consider the question of the U.S. case in comparative context by examining how national levels of secularity relate to societal levels of human development. We close by returning to issues of identity and morality, discussing how cultural perspectives of secularities challenge widely held assumptions and conceptualizations in both the popular and academic understandings of religion.