Introduction

The idea for this book began ten years ago. It was December, and I had just picked up my then three-year-old daughter, Sheila, from preschool. “Look, look, Christmas lights,” she piped up from the back seat of the car, “Mommy, look there’s Santa.”

“Yes, dear,” I replied, “Santa comes every year.”

“Why does Santa come?”

“To make people happy.”

“Why does he want to make people happy?”

“Because it’s Christmas.”

“But why?”

I paused. I was not sure what to tell my daughter. Christmas celebrates the day that Jesus Christ was born? But then she would ask, who was Jesus and why be happy about his birth? Why indeed?

My husband and I celebrate Christmas every year. We get a tree, exchange gifts, go visit family and eat holiday foods. But none of our celebration is about religion. I no longer believe in God, much less a personal deity who incarnates in human form, and neither does he. Both of us were raised Christian but left the church as teenagers and have not returned since, except for friends’ weddings, baptisms, and funerals. While my husband expresses indifference to anything spiritual, I became a seeker of sorts. Over the years, I experimented with Buddhist meditation and feminist goddess rituals and eventually acquired a doctorate in religious studies. That degree has given me a fulfilling career, but it had not prepared me for my daughter’s question about Christmas.

Her questions led to me to ask myself, what do I believe in, and how do I transmit those beliefs to my child? Despite the vagueness of my own spirituality, I began to think that maybe now was the time to introduce religion into Sheila’s life. After all, faith had been an important part of my own childhood. I thought of the rich tradition I grew up with in Southern Germany in the 1960s and 1970s: listening to stories of the
Bible, building a crèche with my sisters, lighting Advent candles, singing carols while my grandmother played the piano, our nightly prayers asking God to protect Mama, Daddy, and everyone else. It was all so beautiful and comforting and safe. I wanted Sheila to have what I had. Even if I had rejected it later in my life, why hold a child hostage to my own doubts? Although I could not pretend to convey the faith my mother had, maybe I could have my daughter baptized and enroll her in Sunday school, as my sister did with her children. But when I ran the idea by my husband he was adamant: “I don’t want Sheila indoctrinated in all that. Besides it would be hypocritical.” He had a point.

I kept thinking about the question, and initially I felt very alone. Although we had secular friends, none of them had children at home. And our religious friends who did have children were raising them either Catholic or Jewish. I did not know anybody else like me. So, as parents often do, I tried reaching out to other moms and dads whom I suspected might be nonreligious. People in Connecticut tend to keep their views on religion to themselves, but when asked directly many were eager to share their experience, and I discovered there were several other parents who shared my concerns. Still, I wondered how representative these parents were of broader trends. After all, we live in New Haven, a college town filled with educated liberals who tend to be more secular than the rest of the population. So, as academics often do, I did some research. An initial review of the relevant work in the social sciences confirmed my growing realization that my struggle is not unusual. Although the majority of Americans are affiliated with organized religion and seek to transmit that tradition to their children, parents with no religion comprise a significant and growing segment of the population.

Recent nationwide surveys show that one-fifth of Americans now list their religious affiliation as “None” or their religious preference as “nothing in particular”—up from only 7 percent twenty years ago. Scholars seeking to compare these individuals to those who do claim a religion, have dubbed them the “Nones,” a term that I will explain in the following chapters. In many parts of the country, the number of Nones rivals that of major religious denominations. Significantly, Nones comprise one-third of adults under thirty, those poised to be parents of the next generation. The decisions they make about religion in their families will help shape the future of organized religion in America.
Who are these Nones? Fortunately for my investigation, their sudden growth has increased scholarly interest in the nonreligious. We now know more about the demographic characteristics of the unaffiliated. For instance, although they are more likely to be young and male and live in certain parts of the country, they increasingly resemble the average American in terms of education, income, and race. We also know more about the Nones’ religious characteristics, although what those characteristics are depends on who you talk to. While there is considerable debate over how secular the Nones are, they are clearly not monolithic. Their ranks include more atheists and agnostics than those of the general population as well as a wide diversity of religious and spiritual worldviews. Recent studies have closely examined various segments of the unaffiliated population such as unchurched Christians, young people, and atheists. But the segment I was interested in, parents, had received little attention. This book is intended to fill that gap.

How do None parents deal with the question of religion in the upbringing of their children? Over the next several years I sought to answer that question by pulling together information from published sources as well as conducting my own qualitative research with parents all over the United States. Much of what we know about Nones is based on quantitative research such as the Gallup polls, the Pew Religious Landscape Survey, and the American Religious Identification Survey, all of which provide a wealth of basic descriptive data. Such data is a powerful tool to identify major cultural changes such as, for example, the dramatic increase in the unaffiliated population. But it tells us little about what this means or about the lived experiences of that population. While surveys show that some None parents seek religious training for their children, they do not tell us why or how. Do they send them to Sunday school or do it themselves? If the parents claim no religion, then why do they want one for their children? And what of those None parents who do not want religion in their child’s life? Why not? How, in an intensely religious society like America, do they avoid it? What alternative, non-religious worldviews do they transmit instead? How do all these parents’ decisions impact their children and the parents themselves? To answer these questions it is mandatory to interact directly with parents, to talk in person for extended periods of time, and to observe families in the context of their home or community.
With the help of grant funding from Sacred Heart University, I was able to do this type of research in diverse regions of the United States, including locations where religious disaffiliation is common and others where it is not. The study employed a grounded theory method of qualitative research, drawing on observations of and interviews with parents ranging in age from twenty-three to fifty-five (a detailed description of the research sample, methods, and analysis is included in the appendix). The parents I met do not mirror perfectly the larger unaffiliated population, but they are representative in several important respects. Recent studies suggest that Nones are no longer distinguished from churched Americans by race, education, or income, yet age, gender, religious background and region continue to be significant markers. My respondent pool was more female and a little older than the average None (a single man in his twenties). Then again, my interest was not in the average None but in unaffiliated parents who are most interested in the question of religious upbringing. More importantly, my respondents are representative of two important characteristics of the unaffiliated population. One is religious background: Most Nones do not start out that way but choose to become unaffiliated as adults. Nearly three-quarters of Nones surveyed were raised in a religious home; among my respondents all but three were raised with religion. Another characteristic is regional distribution: The unaffiliated are more numerous in some places than in others. Reflecting recent patterns, two-thirds of the Nones I interviewed reside in the Pacific Northwest, New England, and the Mountain States; one-third are found in the South. These parallels notwithstanding, the results of this qualitative study cannot, of course, be generalized to explain all None parents in America. They do, however, provide a rich source of information to supplement and sometimes problematize and question what we have learned from larger-scale quantitative research.

The parents whose experiences are presented here did not check boxes on a survey but were interviewed in person in various settings. I conducted most interviews at the respondents’ homes, but I also spent time with them in public settings such as schools, spiritual centers, or secular community centers. Observing individuals on their own turf gave me insights into aspects of parents’ experiences I might otherwise have missed. The ubiquity of religious billboards in one suburb, for example, provided a visible reminder of the strong Evangelical presence
in the local culture. Interacting with parents in their own homes also compelled me to ask questions I might otherwise not have asked; for example, while in the home of one atheist family, I inquired about the meaning of a Christmas tree. All interviews followed a semistructured format and typically lasted an hour or more. I would begin by asking my respondents about their own religious upbringings, their reasons for ending their affiliations, and their current worldviews. Next I would inquire about the decisions parents made about their children: what kinds of worldview they wished to pass on, how they went about doing so, and the challenges they encountered. As I recorded and analyzed parents’ diverse experiences, and reflected on their meanings in light of broader cultural patterns, a bigger story began to emerge. This book is my attempt to tell that story.

The story of how unaffiliated parents deal with religion in their children’s lives is both simpler and more complex than it seems. The media and many academics have tended to frame the discussion of such families in terms of the long-standing conflict between religion and secularism. The rise of Nones may signify secularization, a shift away from America’s longstanding reputation as the most religious nation in the developed world. Or it may mean merely a variation of the status quo: a rejection not of religion but of current religious institutions, a temporary pattern that may reverse itself as new institutions arise to better meet Nones’ needs. Such a framework assumes a high degree of homogeneity among Nones—they are either religious or secular. It also assumes that unaffiliated parents, like churched parents, would raise their children to be like themselves: either nonreligious or believers in conventional religion (usually Christian). The story I tell here raises important questions about these assumptions.

The book shows that None families exhibit a diverse range of perspectives and behaviors that is not easily categorized as either religious or secular, and that in fact challenges us to rethink the way that we define those terms. Underlying that diversity, however, is a common commitment to what I call worldview choice. The word worldview, from the German Weltanschauung, refers to a set of beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and assumptions through which we filter our understanding of the world and our place in it. A more inclusive word than religion, the term encompasses both traditional theistic worldviews (such as Chris-
Christianity, Judaism, or Hinduism) and secular ones (such as humanism or skepticism). Historically, most people have inherited their worldviews, but the last century has seen a steadily growing number of individuals claiming the right to choose their own. Nones represent the cutting edge at this moment in time. While their beliefs and practices vary, they share a perception that all worldviews (religious or secular) are expressions of deeply personal experiences and therefore individuals have the right, and indeed the responsibility, to choose one for themselves. It is that choice they seek to pass on to their children.

To understand how unaffiliated parents deal with religion in the lives of their children, I must first clarify what I mean by the term None. Chapter 1 explores this question and discusses how the unaffiliated are similar to and different from churched Americans. Although there is a lot of data about the religiously uncommitted, the terminology used to describe them is confusing and undermines our understanding. Once one sorts through the labels, however, some patterns do emerge. The growth in Nones, I argue, reflects a longer-term movement toward non-commitment in religion. This trend has significant implications for the social status of Nones in America. On the one hand, there is evidence that Nones are becoming “normalized”: demographically, the unaffiliated today more closely resemble average Americans than they did a generation ago. On the other hand, having no religion continues to be perceived as deviant from the rest of society, particularly in certain regions, and this perception shapes how None parents think about religion in the lives of their children.

The term None defines parents in terms of what they supposedly lack, religion. But this conceptualization ignores the fascinating variety of beliefs and practices that such individuals do have. Chapter 2 explores this variety, presenting a typology of None worldviews illustrated by examples from the parents I studied. Some of these worldviews are secular and some are not, and the lived experience of these individuals raises questions about how scholars traditionally define religiousness and secularity. Indeed, the distinction between religion and secularity may not be the best way to understand what makes Nones distinctive. Rather, what ties this variety of worldviews together is commitment to the sanctity of personal worldview choice.
Our choices are shaped by time. I dropped out of church as a teenager, as many young people do. Not having religion afforded me the freedom to explore spiritual and philosophical alternatives, an adventure that captivated my interests for many years. Having a child changed everything. Being a None was suddenly a problem I had to solve. Although other parents’ stories differ, the experience of starting a family always raises the question of religion. Chapter 3 investigates how becoming a parent changes what it means to be a None. First, I will examine why young and single people are far more likely to drop out of church and have no religious preferences. Next, I look at research that shows that many Nones commit to religion when they marry or start a family. Does this life cycle effect mean there is a causal relationship between family and religious commitment? I will evaluate the evidence for and against this theory. Drawing on the stories of parents in this study, I will propose an alternative explanation for the life cycle effect.

Chapter 4 considers how our worldview choices are shaped by place. In the New England city where I live, not having religion goes largely unnoticed. In other parts of the country, however, being a None makes one a cultural outsider. The meaning of being a None is local—it depends on where you are, and how your religious or secular orientation fits into that local cultural context. I begin by examining the differences between what I term high None zones (places where the None population is large or culturally significant) and low None zones (where this is not the case). I then consider the stories of None parents living in these zones and how that experience shapes their strategies about whether to include religion in the upbringing of their children.

Regardless of where they live, None parents remain a minority in this culture. The majority of American parents do affiliate with religion and raise their children accordingly. Catholic parents send their children to catechism and Jewish parents send theirs to Hebrew school—educational programs that are typically run by the church or synagogue the family belongs to—and what the kids learn is reinforced to varying degrees at home. This strategy is not available to None families. What, then, are None parents doing with their children? Chapter 5 presents a typology of the most common strategies they use, illustrated by stories of parents I studied.
Although their experiences are diverse, unaffiliated parents—unlike their churched counterparts who usually transmit the parents’ own worldviews to their children—are not necessarily raising another generation of Nones. Rather, these parents frame their strategies as helping children make their own spiritual choices. Chapter 6 reflects more deeply on the meaning and impact of this emphasis on choice. At the personal level, choice means freedom but it can also lead to confusion. I draw on recent research in the psychology of decision-making to explain some of the parents’ choices. Choice also has a cultural meaning. I will show that None parents’ desire for spiritual choice is embedded in a wider cultural perception that choice is inherently good, not just for individuals but for society. But is it? After all, choosing one’s religious or secular beliefs or value system is different from, and arguably more important than, selecting which ice cream flavor to eat or even what kind of house to live in. Various scholars have likened the worldview choice orientation to what they call cafeteria religion, linking it with narcissism, moral relativism, and decreasing civic commitment. Others contest that argument. Chapter 6 engages that debate.

However parents raise their children, their ultimate concern is to do what is best for them. Chapter 7 addresses a common concern among many unaffiliated parents: Is religion good for children? Put differently, even if I personally am not religious, is religion something I should be giving to my child? None parents, living in a culture where affiliation with organized religion is the norm, must deal with a barrage of media reporting and research claiming to show that children are better off with religion. The few dissenting voices that exist receive much less attention. I will show how parents hear and respond to those cultural messages. Then I will review what social scientists know about the impact of religion on children and evaluate the evidence.

In the conclusion I reflect on what we—as sociologists of religion or None parents—can learn from this research. For scholars, this book will raise many questions, perhaps most prominently the question of how we define and measure religion and secularity in the populations we study. I will attempt to answer those questions and suggest some avenues for future research. None parents, meanwhile, may be wondering how things turned out for the families whose stories are presented here, including my own, now that several years have passed. I will describe where I fit
in the typology of Nones presented and my family’s experimentation with some of the strategies described in the book. I reflect on how this journey has shaped both me and my child. Spoiler alert: my husband and I are still Nones, and our now thirteen-year-old daughter is a happy, well-adjusted kid who does not believe in God. But that outcome is less interesting than the process of how we arrived there. Our story is not typical, although it does reflect on many of the larger themes addressed in this book. I am grateful to the many families who shared a slice of their lives with me. It is to their stories that I now turn.