

## I

## The Secular Surge

Barack Obama's first presidential inaugural address was historic for many reasons. Among the least noticed is one word: *nonbelievers*. As is expected of American presidents, Obama's address was rife with religious references. He cited the biblical passage that "the time has come to put aside childish things," noted the "God-given promise that all are equal," spoke of "the knowledge that God calls on us to shape an uncertain destiny," invoked God's grace, and – as has become customary – closed his historic speech with "God bless you. And God bless the United States of America." He also highlighted America's religious diversity, calling it a strength. Obama's precise formulation made history: he described the United States as a "nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews, and Hindus, and *nonbelievers*" (Obama 2009). It was the first time ever that a presidential inaugural address mentioned Americans who were not religious.<sup>1</sup>

In the midst of that history-making day, many secular Americans took note. Ed Buckner, at the time the president of American Atheists, said that "President Barack Obama finally did what many before him should have done, rightly citing the great diversity of Americans as part of the nation's great strength and including 'nonbelievers' in that mix" (Waldman 2009). A blog post by the Center for Inquiry also drew attention to Obama's mention of nonbelievers, but it is the comments from those who read the post that best underscore its significance. One commenter wrote, "Thank you, President Obama, for realizing that there are many of us that do not believe with blind faith, and for understanding that we, too, are patriotic Americans" (Grothe 2009).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that in less prominent ways previous American presidents had also acknowledged nonbelievers, including George W. Bush (Gerson, Cannon, and Cromartie 2004) and Gerald Ford (Baker and Smith 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Some secular activists went so far as to suggest that Obama was one of them:

Cheryl K. Chumley, "Bill Maher on Obama: 'He's a Drop-Dead Atheist,'" *The Washington Times*, June 24, 2014; [www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/jun/24/bill-maher-obama-hes-drop-dead-atheist/](http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/jun/24/bill-maher-obama-hes-drop-dead-atheist/); Gina Meeks, "Richard Dawkins Confident President Obama Is an Atheist," *Charisma News*, October 29, 2013, [www.charismanews.com/us/41553-video-richard-dawkins-confident-president-obama-is-an-atheist](http://www.charismanews.com/us/41553-video-richard-dawkins-confident-president-obama-is-an-atheist).

Almost four years later, thousands of nonbelievers gathered on the Washington Mall for the Reason Rally.<sup>3</sup> In the words of its organizers, the 2012 rally was designed to “show the American public that the number of people who don’t believe in a god is growing into a force to be recognized and reckoned with.” David Silverman, who succeeded Buckner as president of American Atheists, addressed the rally’s participants with these words: “We are here and we will never be silent again . . . In years to come, the Reason Rally will be seen as the beginning of the end of the Religious Right’s grip on American life.”<sup>4</sup>

In 2016, thousands of nonbelievers again gathered in the nation’s capital for a second Reason Rally. According to an article by CNN, the “standout favorite” among the participants was US Senator Bernie Sanders (Mellen 2016), who at the time was in the waning days of his unsuccessful bid for the Democratic presidential nomination. It is not surprising that Sanders would gain favor among the self-proclaimed “secular American voting bloc.” During the race, Sanders did something no other serious presidential candidate had ever done: openly describe himself as “not actively involved with organized religion” (Sellers and Wagner 2016). However, he pointedly denied the claim that he is an *atheist*, as was suggested in leaked emails from Democratic National Committee officials, in which they discussed deploying his alleged atheism against him (Boorstein and Zauzmer 2016; “Sanders: ‘I’m Not Atheist . . . It’s an Outrage’” 2016).

The public presence of nonbelievers has also expanded outside the glare of national politics. A good example occurred in December 2018, when people entering the County-City Building in South Bend, Indiana were met by a traditional crèche, complete with small statues of Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus in a manger. Less traditionally, right next to that nativity scene was a display featuring another version of the scene, only this one featured the Statue of Liberty, flanked by George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin. In the center was a manger holding not the Christ child but instead the Bill of Rights. Right next to this display is a banner with the messages “Oh Come All Ye Faithless” and “Even Heathens Celebrate the Season!”<sup>5</sup>

The president of the group responsible for the banner and alternative “nativity,” the Northern Indiana Atheists, told the *South Bend Tribune* that after repeated calls to the county board of commissioners their application for the holiday installation was eventually approved. County Commissioner Andy

<sup>3</sup> The US Parks Service does not provide estimates of crowd size for events on the Mall but the *Washington Post* wrote that there were “several thousand” present (Aratani 2012).

<sup>4</sup> See “2012 Reason Rally: Atheists and Secularists Gather,” Reason Rally (website), <https://reason-rally.org/2012-reason-rally.html>.

<sup>5</sup> The Freedom From Religion Foundation placed similar displays in the state capitols of Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, California, Washington, and New Hampshire (Freedom From Religion Foundation 2018).

Kostielney, a Republican, indicated that “This was a pretty simple decision. If we allow one, then we would allow others” (Booker 2018). His understanding of the law is correct, and so visitors to this government building in the American heartland were greeted with dueling holiday messages: one a celebration of Christianity, the other a celebration of the Constitution.

Each of these stories illustrates the recent “secular surge” in the United States: the expanding size, increased political engagement, and emerging collective identity of secular Americans.<sup>6</sup>

When Obama referred to “nonbelievers,” he was acknowledging a demographic reality. Although the precise contours of the secular population are debated, there can be no denying that its ranks are large and growing. One common metric is the share of Americans who report having no religious affiliation, or to use the term of art, are religious “Nones.” As Figure 1.1 shows, roughly 23 percent of Americans made this claim in 2018, up from 5 percent in 1972, 14 percent in 2000, and 18 percent in 2010 (Norpoth 2019). And this increase parallels declines in worship attendance and belief in God.<sup>7</sup> At roughly 70 million adults, there were more Nones in the United States than mainline Protestants or Roman Catholics (Pew Research Center 2015), and they were more numerous than either Latinos or African Americans.<sup>8</sup> But as with religion, ethnicity, and race, there was considerable diversity within the secular population, with self-identified atheists being a small portion of the total.

The Reason Rally underscores that the secular surge is more than just demographics: secular activists have become increasingly prominent in politics, seeking in part to build a cohesive electoral constituency out of the diverse nonreligious population. These efforts are led by the expansion of existing secular organizations, such as the American Humanist Association, American Atheists, and the Freedom From Religion Foundation (founded in 1941, 1963, and 1978, respectively), and the creation of new groups, such as the Center for Inquiry (1991), the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers

<sup>6</sup> For an earlier use of the term “secular surge,” see Haught (2018).

<sup>7</sup> These figures are from the General Social Survey. In the GSS dataset:

No religion: religious preference is “None” (RELIG)

Never attend worship: frequency of attendance at religious services is “Never” (ATTEND)

Nonbeliever: “I don’t believe in God” or “I don’t know whether there is a God and I don’t believe there is any way to find out” (GOD)

Data are weighted (WTSSALL)

Other data sources, such as the American National Election Study, American Religious Identification Survey, Gallup, and the Pew Research Center, all show exactly the same trend. Note that given the social desirability of religious attendance in the United States, the number of nonattenders is probably higher (Brenner 2011; Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves 1993).

<sup>8</sup> “Quick Facts: United States: Population Estimates, July 1, 2019,” United States Census Bureau (website), [www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045216](http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045216).

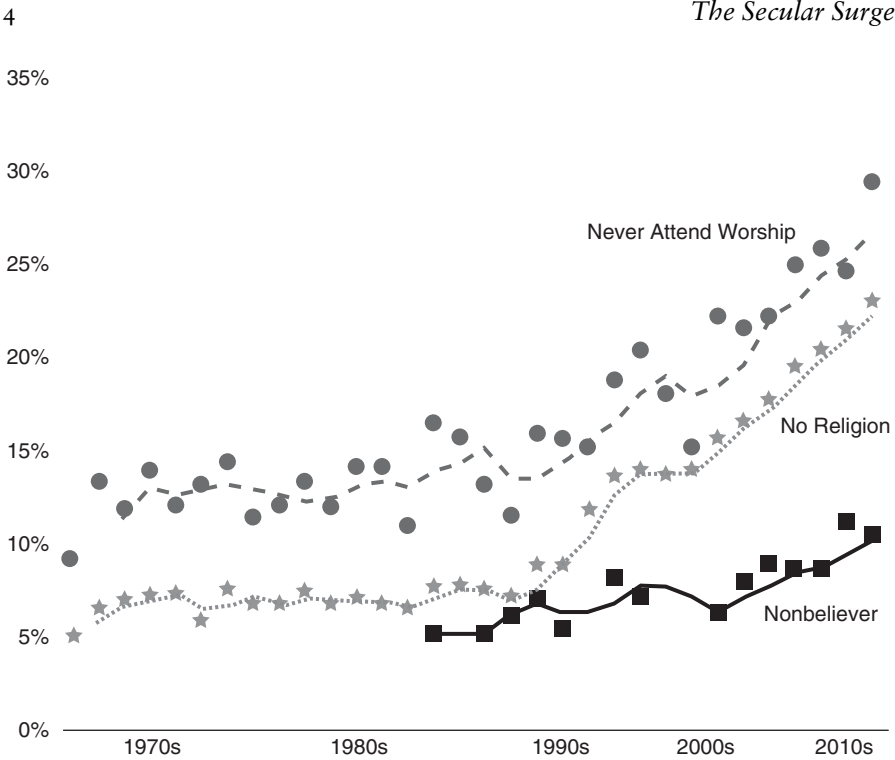


FIGURE 1.1 The rising tide of nonreligiosity  
Source: *General Social Survey*

(1998), the Secular Student Alliance (2001), and the Secular Coalition for America (2002). Taken together, these organizations engage in litigation, lobbying, coalition building, and campaigning as well as publicizing secular perspectives on a wide range of issues (Kettell 2013).<sup>9</sup> And by 2013, seculars had a political party to call their own – the National Secular Party. Beyond such organizations, secular activists are engaged in many political venues, especially the Democratic Party. But as the experience of the not-particularly-religious-but-not-an-atheist Bernie Sanders reveals, secular people still have an uncertain place within American politics. Indeed, it is notable that Obama chose the word “nonbelievers” rather than “atheists” in his first inaugural address.

The holiday display by the Northern Indiana Atheists demonstrates that Secularists are increasingly a presence in the public square. This presence includes legal advocacy over the public role of religion – and irreligion. Secular organizations have brought many legal battles over the always-fraught relationship between church and state. Can prayers be said at town

<sup>9</sup> For a sense of the wide variety of political activities of secular activists, see the American Humanist Association “What We Do” page: <https://americanhumanist.org/what-we-do/>.

council meetings? Can places of worship receive a government subsidy? Can a cross be displayed as a public war memorial? Secular advocacy has also included seeking legal protection under nondiscrimination statutes. For example, both Portland, Oregon and Madison, Wisconsin include the rights of nonbelievers in their municipal civil rights codes, alongside the protected characteristics of race, religion, gender, and national origin (Simmons 2019).

Secularist organizations also promote a sense of secular community by celebrating secular “holidays,” such as Darwin Day and the National Day of Reason.<sup>10</sup> Nor are they limited to serving the needs of fellow Secularists, as some secular groups engage in the sort of charitable work long associated with religious organizations. In the case of the Northern Indiana Atheists, the organization’s website mentions its charitable activities, including a clothing drive for the homeless and a program to adopt a family in need for the holidays. As one secular leader argues, Secularists “need to do more than just pry people out of religion . . . We need to develop secular and atheist communities, to replace the ones people often lose when they let go of their religion” (Christina 2012). In building this sense of community, some Secularists are forming a new collective identity.

The goal of this book is to describe and explain the consequences of the secular surge in American politics. To the extent that the three key elements of the secular surge – growing size, increased engagement, emerging identity – reinforce each other, a self-conscious secular community could field a cadre of secular activists to mobilize a corps of secular citizens in pursuit of common political objectives. If so, the fault line between the religious and secular populations could deepen, reinforcing the high levels of political polarization in the United States. However, we also suggest that the secular surge is not *destined* to lead to greater political conflict. Perhaps many religious and secular Americans will find common cause. Politics, after all, makes for strange bedfellows.

#### SECULARITY AND ITS COMPLEXITIES

As suggested by Bernie Sanders’s denial that he was an atheist, the very language used to describe the secular population is fraught. The variety of commonly used terms reads like a thesaurus entry: Nones, atheists, agnostics, nontheists, humanists, skeptics, freethinkers, brights. Moving forward, we will use “secular” to refer to anyone within this diverse population, and “secularism” to reference beliefs, identities, and activities that distinguish Secularists from

<sup>10</sup> For good examples of these services, see the American Humanist Association: Education Center (<http://cohe.humanistinstitute.org/>) and the Humanist Society ([www.thehumanistsociety.org/](http://www.thehumanistsociety.org/)); Darwin Day (<https://americanhumanist.org/what-we-do/darwin-day/>) and National Day of Reason (<https://americanhumanist.org/what-we-do/national-day-of-reason/>), and Humanist Disaster Relief (<https://americanhumanist.org/what-we-do/humanist-disaster-recovery/>).

other Americans – including those who are simply nonreligious as well as those who combine secularism and religiosity. From time to time, we will also use the term “secularity” to describe the combination of all these societal currents, as an analog to “religiosity.” When necessary, we also use more specific terms, such as Nones (people without a religious affiliation) and atheists (people who believe there is no God) – two groups that are not identical, as we will illustrate below.

In this vein, we should be clear that in describing seculars and secularism we are referring to individuals’ own *personal* beliefs, identities, and activities, and not public policy or law. The term “secularism” often refers to a state’s constitutional structure, and whether it mandates what Americans commonly call a “separation between church and state.” By such a constitutional standard, the United States would be considered to have a secular *state* – the first amendment to the United States Constitution prohibits both the establishment of religion and government-imposed limitations on individuals’ free exercise of their religion, while Article VI prohibits a religious test for public office.

Despite having a secular state, the United States can also be described as a religious *nation*. Indeed, a plurality of Americans say the United States “has always been and is currently a Christian nation” (Cox and Piacenza 2015). This pattern helps account for numerous examples of public endorsement of religion, usually of a Christian – and specifically Protestant – variety. Some are a matter of custom, such as the aforementioned references to religion in presidential speeches and the addition of “so help me God” to close the presidential oath of office. Others have an official governmental imprimatur, like the phrase “In God We Trust” on US currency and “one nation under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance, and the references to the divine found in every state constitution (Sandstrom 2017b). In short, while Americans often subscribe to the principle of a secular state, what that means in practice remains a matter of often-heated debate. We will call these attitudes *public secularism*.

It is worth noting that personal opinions on public secularism are not necessarily a reflection of an individual’s own level of religious devotion. This pattern follows from the long arc of American history, where many proponents of a strict nonestablishment of religion have themselves been highly religious people (Hamburger 2002). Likewise, some secular people have also been staunch defenders of the free exercise of religion (Kurtz, Bullough, and Madigan 1993). Of course, we expect public secularism and levels of religious devotion to be related, but precisely how is an empirical question (which we will address in Chapter 3).

To date, the empirical literature on the American secular population has focused almost entirely on the decline of personal religiosity – the absence of religious identities, beliefs, and activities. By this definition, “secular” is not a commitment to distinctly secular beliefs, identities, or activities, but simply a lack of commitment to things religious. While there is value in this approach, it obscures important differences among secular people, much as there are

important differences among religious people. The rise of the Nones is a case in point: there is a great deal of diversity within this group. Some Nones are best described as “liminals,” that is, their lack of affiliation is ambiguous and changes easily (Hout 2017; Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam 2010). Others are “nominals,” as their lack of affiliation is unrelated to their beliefs and practices (Hout and Fischer 2002). Still others are “spirituals.” Their lack of affiliation is a disinclination toward organized religion (Fuller 2001).

Nones should not be equated with atheists, as many people who do not affiliate with a religion nonetheless believe in God. According to the General Social Survey, roughly 20 percent of the Nones say that they are certain God exists, while another 31 percent believe in a higher power, even if not a personal God. We will call the absence of religion *personal nonreligiosity*, recognizing that there are as many ways to depart from religion as there are ways to be religious. Put another way, people we describe as nonreligious are defined primarily by what they are *not*.

Some Nones add to the absence of religion an embrace of secular beliefs, identities, and activities. Such people often believe in scientific naturalism, rationalism, humanism, or freethinking; they may also identify themselves as atheists, agnostics, or humanists; and they may seek guidance from secular sources, belong to a secular organization, or celebrate secular holidays. Many such individuals partake of a secular worldview. We refer to this affirmative position as *personal secularism*, recognizing that there are likely many ways to be secular.<sup>11</sup> People who are personally secular, therefore, are defined by what they *are*.

Measuring personal nonreligiosity empirically is straightforward. It is simply the inverse of how religiosity is measured: *not* affiliating with a religion, *not* attending religious services, *not* praying, *not* believing in scripture, and so forth (Kellstedt et al. 1996). In contrast, measuring personal secularism empirically presents more of a challenge because it requires affirmation of secular beliefs, identities, and activities. To this end, we have developed new measures of personal secularism, drawing on elements associated with secularity.

Although related empirically, personal nonreligiosity and personal secularism are not simply two sides of the same coin. Instead, these concepts represent differences in *kind* rather than differences in *degree*. Table 1.1 offers a simple illustration of the overlap of these two concepts. Personal nonreligiosity is arrayed vertically down the side of the figure, divided into “low” and “high” categories, while personal secularism is arrayed horizontally across the top of the figure, and also divided into “low” and

<sup>11</sup> In earlier work, we used slightly different terms for these concepts. Instead of “personal nonreligiosity” we referred to “passive secularism” because individuals fell into the category by virtue of doing nothing – that is, being passive in religious terms. “Personal secularism” was labeled “active secularism,” as it refers to doing something – that is, being active in secular terms (Campbell et al. 2018; Campbell and Layman 2017).



TABLE 1.1 *Overlap of personal nonreligiosity and personal secularism*

	Personal Secularism	
	Low	High
Personal nonreligiosity		
High	Non-Religionists	Secularists
Low	Religionists	Religious Secularists

“high” categories. For now, we present these four secular–religious categories for illustration. We get into specifics in Chapter 2, where we introduce our measures of both personal nonreligiosity and secularism.

We label the top left-hand combination *Non-Religionists* because they score high on personal nonreligiosity but also low on personal secularism. These are ideal-type Nones – in two senses of the word – combining the lack of religiosity with the absence of secularism. In contrast, we label the top right-hand combination as *Secularists*, scoring high on both personal nonreligiosity and personal secularism. They combine a lack of religiosity with the presence of secularism. The bottom left-hand combination we label *Religionists*, scoring low in nonreligiosity (high in religiosity) and low on secularism. They embrace religion but eschew secularism.

The remaining combination, in the lower right-hand of the figure, is intriguing. The *Religious Secularists* score low on personal nonreligiosity (high in religiosity) but high on personal secularism. It may seem counterintuitive for “religious” people to also be “Secularists.” But many religious traditions have space for beliefs that come from the natural realm. A good example are religious modernists, who believe in God but also in science and reason (Hutchison 1992). This mixed combination fully reveals the conceptual distinctiveness of nonreligiosity and secularism. Indeed, this combination resembles the contemporary distinction between “religion” and “spirituality” (Baker and Smith 2015). One person can be “spiritual but not religious,” while another can be “spiritual and religious” – just as a person could partake of various combinations of personal nonreligiosity and personal secularism.

Although often unrecognized, the distinction between nonreligiosity and secularism has a long history. It can be seen in the shifting meaning of the term “atheist.” The word derives originally from ancient Greek, where it meant “without god(s)” (Whitmarsh 2016). This broad sense of the word fits well with our concept of personal nonreligiosity. However, during the Enlightenment, the term “atheist” took on a narrower meaning: one who was an adherent to “atheism,” understood as the opposite of theism. If theism is a belief in the existence of God (or gods), atheism was the affirmative belief that god(s) do not exist (Rowe 1998). This understanding was further narrowed by critiques of



religion from the perspective of a secular worldview (Armstrong 1998), which fits with our concept of personal secularism.

Our concepts align with the types of secularity Charles Taylor describes in his magisterial book *A Secular Age* (2007). First there is secularity 1, or the withdrawal of religion from public spaces, what we call public secularism. Next is secularity 2, or the individual-level decline in religious belief and behavior, or what we refer to as nonreligiosity. In Taylor's words, these are both "subtraction stories," as they refer to religion having been removed either from public life or an individual's mind. Taylor then describes a third conception of secularity, which he defines as a society in which religious belief has become "one option among others" (3) as it competes with nonreligious influences, each of which is "something in itself" (Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun 2010, 8). This kind of secularity is an "addition story."

There are many kinds of secular alternatives in the United States, most defined with reference to religion, largely because these alternatives arose from various critiques of religion. One type is a religion without a focus on theistic beliefs, such as the American Ethical Union.<sup>12</sup> Another type is a life stance with clear parallels to aspects of religion – congregational life, rituals, and celebrants – but with explicitly nontheistic beliefs, such as "religious humanism."<sup>13</sup> Yet another type is an explicitly nontheistic belief system that offers practical and moral guidance for individual and social life – for example "secular humanism."<sup>14</sup> Another alternative is a consistent nontheistic worldview, such as some versions of atheism.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The AEU's motto is "deed before creed." It describes itself as "a religious movement because for us the ethical quest has the depth of a religious commitment, and because we recognize the value of a community of support, celebration, and action." See "Mission and Vision," <https://aeu.org/who-we-are/mission-vision/>.

<sup>13</sup> Examples include the "UUHumanists," part of the Unitarian Universalist Association ([www.huumanists.org/](http://www.huumanists.org/)); the Humanist Society, an affiliate of the American Humanist Association ([www.thehumanistsociety.org/history](http://www.thehumanistsociety.org/history)); and Sunday Assembly (for one example see <https://sundayassemblysiliconvalley.org/>).

<sup>14</sup> The Center for Inquiry defines the term this way: "Because no transcendent power will save us, secular humanists maintain that humans must take responsibility for themselves ... Far from living in a moral vacuum, secular humanists 'wish to encourage wherever possible the growth of moral awareness and the capacity for free choice and an understanding of the consequences thereof'" (<https://secularhumanism.org/what-is-secular-humanism/secular-humanism-defined/>). However, there has been considerable debate over whether secular humanism is in fact a religion. Many critics want to define it as a religion, while many adherents do not.

<sup>15</sup> American Atheists define atheism as "the comprehensive world view of persons who are free from theism and have freed themselves of supernatural beliefs altogether. It is predicated on ancient Greek Materialism ... Atheism involves the mental attitude that unreservedly accepts the supremacy of reason and aims at establishing a lifestyle and ethical outlook verifiable by experience and the scientific methods, independent of all arbitrary assumptions of authority and creeds" ([www.atheists.org/about/our-vision/](http://www.atheists.org/about/our-vision/)).

These secular alternatives suggest a functional counterpart to religion in one way or another, much like the distinction John Dewey (2013) drew between “religion” (organization of particular faiths) and the “religious” (the experience of faith common to all religions). His concept of a “common faith” underlying alternative religions could now include secular alternatives as well, which exist alongside a host of religious alternatives in American society – some long-standing, some newly arrived, and some newly minted.

While our concepts mesh with Taylor’s, we have a different objective. He blends philosophy and history to trace the historical arc and normative implications of a society in which religion is a choice. We provide an empirical examination of how individuals who partake of different combinations of personal nonreligiosity and personal secularism make political choices in the contemporary United States.

Despite our focus on the secular surge, it is important to remember that Americans as a whole are far from abandoning religion. The United States remains a highly religious nation, especially when compared to its international peers.<sup>16</sup> For example, recent studies by the Pew Research Center find that 53 percent of Americans say that religion is very important in their lives, as compared to 11 percent of Western Europeans. Similarly, while 63 percent of Americans believe in God with absolute certainty, only 15 percent of Western Europeans do.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, it is the rapid growth of personal secularism within such a religious population that sets the stage for a secular–religious fault line in American politics.

## SECULARITY, SECULARIZATION, AND POLITICS

America’s recent secular surge has turned the tables in the long-standing debate within the sociology of religion between advocates for and critics of what is loosely called secularization theory. Going back to the seminal social theorists, such as Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, many scholars have argued that secularization is inevitable: as societies modernize, religion fades in importance – because, to paraphrase Walter Lippmann (1982), the acids of

<sup>16</sup> In fact, the Pew studies show that in terms of religiosity, Nones in the United States are actually quite comparable to Western Europeans who identify themselves as Christians. For example, 13 percent of Americans with no religion and 14 percent of Western European Christians say religion is very important in their lives. Twenty percent of Nones in the United States and 18 percent of Christians in Western Europe pray daily. Twenty-seven percent of unaffiliated Americans and 23 percent of Western European Christians believe in God with absolute certainty (Pew Research Center 2018).

<sup>17</sup> See Angelina E. Theodorou, “Americans Are in the Middle of the Pack Globally When It Comes to Importance of Religion,” Pew Research Center, December 23, 2015, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/23/americans-are-in-the-middle-of-the-pack-globally-when-it-comes-to-importance-of-religion/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/23/americans-are-in-the-middle-of-the-pack-globally-when-it-comes-to-importance-of-religion/) and Griffin Paul Jackson, “Western Europe’s Christians Are as Religious as America’s ‘Nones,’” *Christianity Today*, May 19, 2018, [www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/may/pew-western-europe-christians-religious-practice-us-nones.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/may/pew-western-europe-christians-religious-practice-us-nones.html).