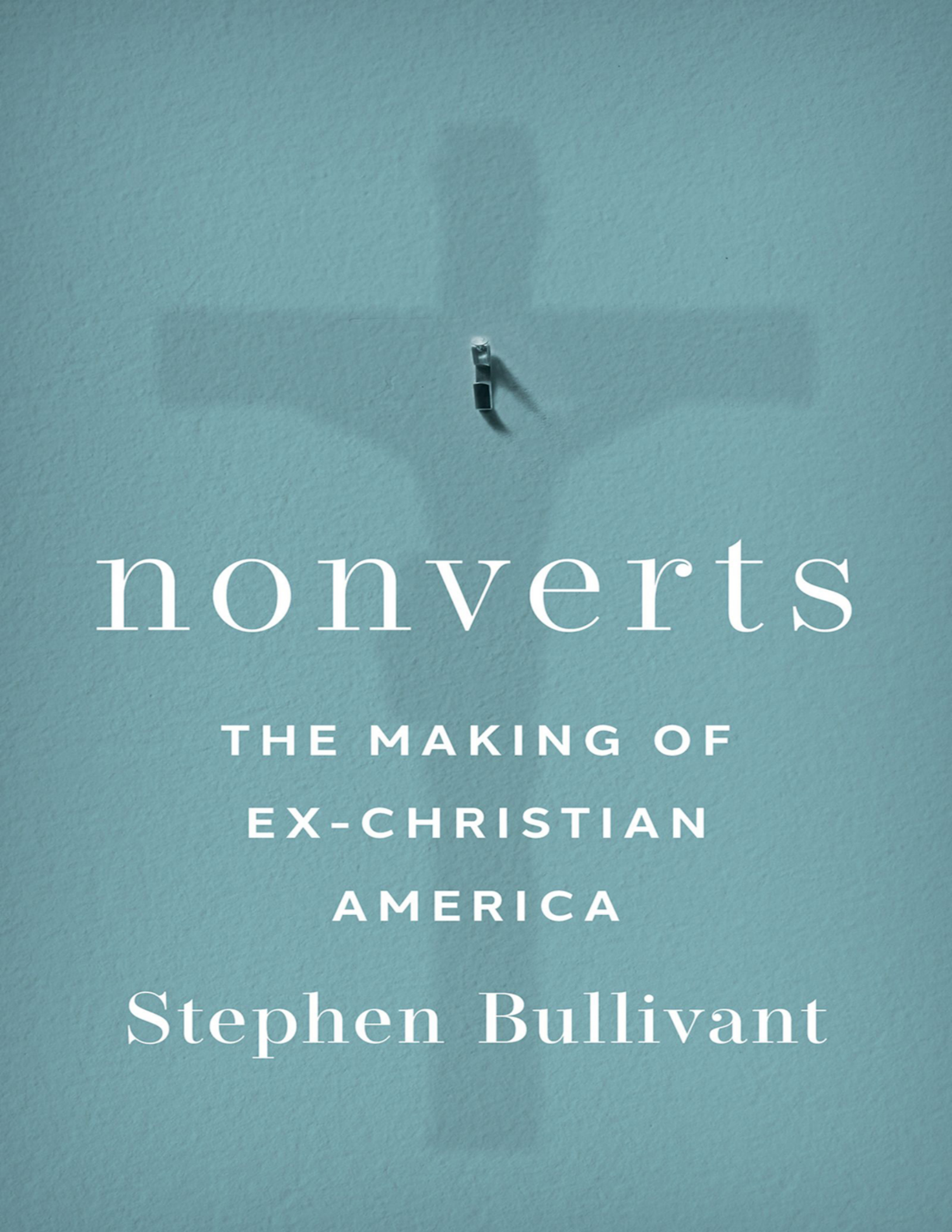
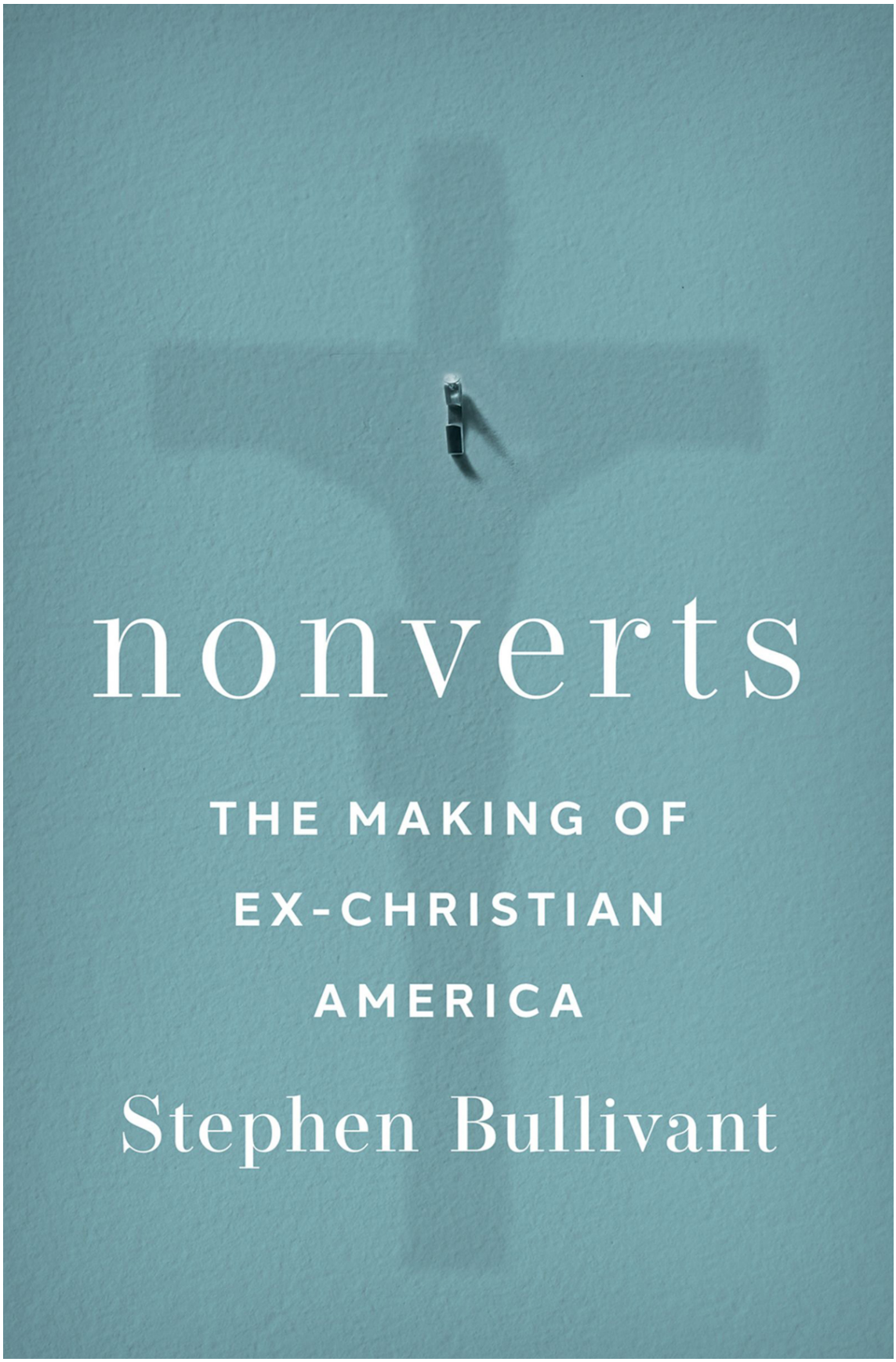


nonverts

THE MAKING OF EX-CHRISTIAN AMERICA

Stephen Bullivant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As well as meeting around fifty of *Nonverts*' participants myself, I also had the assistance of two excellent researchers: Dr. Jacqui Frost and the late Dr. Tommy Coleman, who conducted interviews for me in Minnesota and Tennessee, respectively. News of Tommy's untimely death reached me in December 2021, as I was in the midst of making the final edits to this manuscript. This book is dedicated to him.

Many others contributed to this project in all kinds of ways. The work was made possible by the generosity of the John Templeton Foundation, which funded the research as part of the "Understanding Unbelief" project (grant no. 6024), led by my long-time "nonreligion" colleagues, collaborators, and compadres Drs. Lois Lee, Jon Lanman, and Miguel Farias (plus me).

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NOTE ON SOURCES AND REFERENCING

Please note that where I have quoted directly from my interviewees, I have occasionally "tidied" the transcripts for ease of reading. I have kept these changes to a minimum, however, and have been careful to preserve both original meaning and personal, idiomatic style.

Where possible, I have given page references for works cited. However, in several cases, I read the books on Kindle or listened to them as audiobooks. In these cases, rather than give generally unhelpful references to "location" or "timestamps," I have simply indicated the chapter instead.

All web links given in the endnotes were correct as of October 2021.

1

None the Up and Up

"You British?"

"Yeah. I live near London," I reply, handing over my passport.

"You're the third Brit we've had in today."

"We're preparing for Brexit," I joke. He nods thoughtfully, with solemn affirmation.

"Y'all'll need it."

"It," in this case, isn't political wisdom, or prayer, or a stockpile of food or medicine (though, in the event, all three would have been prescient advice). The "it" I am apparently in need of today is firearms training.

I don't know whether southern Louisiana is renowned for its gun ranges, but I can honestly say I've never been to a nicer one. The people are warm and welcoming. Safety and responsibility are emphasized at all times. Even the T-shirts emblazoned with "LOVE" spelled out with weaponry—the "O" is a grenade; the "E" looks, to my as-yet-untrained eye, like an upended Kalashnikov—are neatly arranged and reasonably priced.

I'm here as the guest of John, a professional in his early thirties and an ambassadorial firearms enthusiast: "always interested to expose people with no experience with guns to the gun culture, especially if they are from another country." We meet at a coffee shop on the other side of town before driving over in our own vehicles. I got lost in traffic on the way, but I know I'm in the right place when I spy John's "Taxation is Theft" bumper sticker in the parking lot. John, evidently a regular, is inside chatting with the staff. With him are the guns he has carefully chosen for my afternoon's education: two pistols and an AR-15 semiautomatic.

John is the second new person I've met in town, and I like him a lot. He's earnest and erudite, laying great store by evidence, facts, and rational argument: "pro-science," albeit not to the extent of "venerating" its findings

uncritically, and getting a "giant science boner"—all his phrases—about it. Our conversation flows freely: from the ideas of Epicurus to the sex lives of octopuses, right through to the future of climate change, the societal implications of artificial intelligence, and what transferable skills a modern time-traveler might have in the ancient Roman job market. ("Because we know that germs are a thing and that if you boil all your instruments and wash stuff . . . So that would be John in ancient Rome: just a weird doctor who had a funny accent from the future.") Since he tells me he's "the kind of person who thinks before he speaks," these are clearly the kinds of things he's thought a great deal about.

Compared to his real pet topics, though, these are merely the byproducts of wide reading and idle musing. What *really* interests John are politics, guns, and, well, the politics of guns. "I used to be a Republican," he later tells me over email, "when I thought I knew more than I did." An enthusiastic Bush voter in 2004, he only "grudgingly" supported McCain four years later "because I was so concerned about Obama." Those fears softened over time when "Obama didn't do all the 'extreme' far-left stuff that I had allowed Republican talking points to scare me about." Lesson learned, John bought his AR-15 just before the 2016 election, "as I was sure that Hillary would win, talk about gun control, and cause another Obama-era panic-buying situation and drive prices up." The Trump years, though "a total shit-show," at least provided a much needed "shake-up." Ultimately, though, John perceives little difference between red and blue: "The status quo on so many things remains the same regardless of who is in power. You get unchecked spending, huge deficits, and constant warfare. You just get it with or without abortions." He's voted Libertarian since 2012.

* * *

I don't know whether southern Louisiana is renowned for its heavily inked, polyamorous bisexuals with long-standing penchants for the BDSM and "Leather" subcultures, who have the title "Reverend" on their business cards. But it should be. Because Judy, my other new friend in town, is an engaging example of the genre.

Now in her late forties, she has seen a fair bit of life—and, more than once, come perilously close to losing it. "In my very early 20s, I nearly died from an overdose. Then when I was getting clean and struggling with that, I was the victim of intimate partner assault and he nearly killed me." Left to

die in a pool of her own blood and struggling to breathe with broken ribs, she somehow survived the night. A friend turned up the next day, called 911, and got her to the ER just in time.

Such traumas would have broken a weaker person. Or if not, they might at least have soured their outlook on the world. Not so Judy. She describes her life's mission as being one of "purposeful mindfulness. My focus is to make sure that I and the people around me experience as much love and joy and kindness as they can. Because there's just not enough of it going around." Central to her own practice of this are what she terms "little adventures": "People, I think, spend a lot of time coveting things that are bigger, better, more awesome, more amazing. They want the experience with capital letters: *The Experience*. But I would much rather have a life built on little memories, little adventures." Chief among these are ones shared with her husband and boyfriend, plus their own other partners—and so-called step-children: "Our tribe is incredibly intertwined and involved with each other, each other's lives, not necessarily romantically but just . . . If I died right now, those little adventures would be enough to have zero regrets for the choices in my life."

Beyond her own tribe, "Reverend Judy"—she was ordained online by the Universal Life Church, joining such fellow clergy as Adele and Stephen Colbert—works part-time as a wedding officiant, specializing in LGBTQ ceremonies.[1] Even in this city, which Judy and others stress is a *long* way, culturally speaking, from cosmopolitan New Orleans, this is a growing market.

Judy started formally blessing same-sex couples some fifteen years ago, around the same time Louisianans voted four-to-one to amend the state constitution to ban same-sex marriage. Since the US Supreme Court legalized it, however, Judy has regularly performed such weddings. "Blessings" remain popular at the annual city Pride event, with many keen publicly to "reaffirm their coupleness." These all help Judy's mission to "leave as many positive, impactful memories and footprints as I possibly can." So too, I expect, does her other job: running a bar. She sums up her philosophy with a nod to neopaganism: "All of those things absolutely give my life meaning. The fact that—to borrow one from the Wiccans—I've done no harm."

In politics (I bring it up; she doesn't) Judy also zigs where others zag. Regarding the two-party system to be "fundamentally broken, painfully

broken," she prefers to support whichever candidate best matches her "fairly liberal set" of issues. In practice, that ends up making it "absolutely, absolutely imperative" for her to vote Democrat, even if that usually means —as it did in 2016—supporting a "political candidate who really does not represent me as an individual." When we spoke in summer 2018, she was "actually cautiously optimistic" for 2020, "because I am seeing lots of grassroots and lower level elections going to Democrats in surprising upsets." Meanwhile, she adds grimly, "the dumpster is burning . . ."

* * *

For all their contrasts, John and Judy have two very important things in common with each other—and moreover, with tens of millions of their fellow Americans. The first is that neither the straitlaced semiautomatic stockpiler nor the ebulliently mohawked progressive regards themselves as belonging to a religion. They are, in the media's now-ubiquitous terminology, religious "nones."

For her part, on surveys Judy normally opts for "no religion." If pushed and in the right kind of mood, she might gloss this with "conscientious objector, because it gets a laugh," or else simply identifies as "atheist" or "agnostic." Though the former is nearer to her actual position, she admits to some ingrained discomfort with the term itself: "Even now I struggle to identify myself as an atheist, although technically I suppose that I am one. But my first thought when I hear the word is bereft. Bereft of belief, bereft of faith, bereft of consolation and comfort." This instinctive, Pavlovian response soon gives way, however. "My second thought when I think of atheism is freethought and freedom."

John is just straight-up nonreligious: if the survey has a dedicated "atheist" tick-box, all the better. He used to identify as an agnostic, but after "doing more reading on the topic" he took the plunge: "Now I associate agnosticism with just not thinking about it enough at all." Where once he linked atheism to the "hypothetical militant atheist archetype," now he simply sees it as "just the default" for folks like him (i.e., "sceptical"). Like a lot of the people we'll meet in the coming pages, however, as comfortable as John is personally with identifying with the A-word, "I find that saying 'not religious' in mixed company is a way safer bet than saying 'atheist' because some people might hear 'atheist' and think that I'm actively trying to ruin their fun with their belief and their religion, and I'm not."

The second main thing they have in common is that both were brought up, albeit to different degrees, "in" a religion. That is to say, they are not simply nones, but what I call "nonverts": think "converts," but going *from* a religion to having none.

For John, growing up with religion amounted to little more than being baptized as a baby "for family reasons." His own parents were functionally nonreligious—"they just never even brought it up." His only memories of church are being taken, maybe twice, "because we were staying with dad's parents that weekend and it was awkward not to pretend." This meager experience did little to whet his appetite. Predictably enough, religion never really took.

Judy's upbringing was toward the opposite end of spectrum. Though she describes her stepfather as "a kind of lapsed Italian Catholic," her mother was and is notably pious in a traditionalist Catholic mold. Though never a fan of her mom's Masses in Latin, Judy was nonetheless "incredibly, painfully devout." Most unusually for a middle-schooler in the 1980s, she had even "gone as far as speaking to the Mother Superior at the convent here, making a fairly informal pledge to join as soon as I graduated: to take vows, or at least to try the convent." For reasons we'll cover later, this didn't last too long. By the age of sixteen, she had already dropped out of church more or less completely: no youth group, no Sunday school, no Mass. She retained a "lapsed Catholic" identity into her mid-twenties, marrying in the church for cultural and family reasons, while exploring various other spiritual paths: "I played around with nature religions for a while, paganism and Wicca. Buddhism as well; I'm a fan. If you had to pick one—it's not really a religion exactly—but if you had to pick one, I'm a big fan of that." Ultimately, she realized that she didn't have to pick one at all. "The idea of mystical spiritualism was very comforting for a long time. I don't need it though. And I think that maybe that's age, maybe that's study, maybe it's just life experience, I don't know. I just don't see it."

"Nonverts" may be a new coinage, and admittedly something of an etymological abomination. But the *reality* it points to, I'm convinced, is indispensable for properly making sense of the present, recent past, and long-term future of American religion. As I hope to show, nonverts are the key to understanding much of the so-called rise of the nones, how and why it happened, who they are exactly, and *what it all means* for the present and future of America. If that sounds like a lot—well, it is. But then, as we're

about to see, there are a whole lot of nones, and a whole lot of those nones were once religious. And they are in the process of fundamentally and decisively changing the face of American society.

* * *

The fact is, in today's USA, Judy and John are in very good company. Nones account for roughly one in four American adults, or about *59 million* people. And as you might already suspect, they are far more diverse than popular stereotypes might have you believe. Furthermore, barring some Great Millennial Revival, this proportion is set to grow and grow for the foreseeable future. According to the biennial General Social Survey, in 2018 a third of 18-to-29-year-olds cited "no religion" as their personal "religious preference." The 2021 data are even more striking, with 30% of all adults and 44% of 18-to-29-year-olds identifying as nones. But for reasons I'll explain in detail in Chapter 3, there are good reasons (Covid, for one) for being cautious about these figures. Lest you think that that's just what late-teens and twenty-somethings are like, and that they'll all come altar-calling back when they grow up a bit . . . well, the signs aren't remotely favorable.

Figure 1.1 makes this point more clearly and concisely than I can in words. It shows just how rapidly the nonreligious share of the US population has expanded over the past twenty to thirty years. It also shows how young adults affirm "no religion" at double or triple the rate that the same age group did in any year between 1972 and 1994, when the "none" population first began to rise. Significantly, this wasn't simply a function of nones entering adulthood. That was certainly a part of it. But for reasons not immediately obvious, claiming no religion was becoming increasingly popular in other age groups, too.

Figure 1.1 Proportions of all US adults, and US adults under 30, with no religious affiliation, over time.
Source: General Social Survey (1972–2018; weighted data)

Attempting to make sense, at a deep level, of how this has come about, and why it did so *when* it did is one of the overriding concerns of this book. It's a complex tale. America is, after all, a big, diverse, and fascinating place—and religion is a bigger, more diverse, and more fascinating topic in the United States than in most other countries. So too, therefore, is the story of how large swathes of Americans have lost, or at least substantially downsized, their religious believing, behaving, and belonging.

One major clue lies in the simple fact that, like Judy and John, a clear majority of America's nones haven't always felt this way. They are nonverts. That is, they used to be—and saw themselves to be—religious "somethings." In most cases, this was the "something" they were brought up as. Others may well have been various kinds of religious "somethings"

along the road to becoming nones. Judy, for example, is one of America's roughly 16 million nonverts who say they were brought up Catholic. Add to them something like 7.5 million ex-Baptists, 2 million ex-Methodists, 2 million ex-Lutherans, and 1 million each of ex-Episcopalians and ex-Presbyterians. Another 2 million nones were brought up in non-Christian religions, just over half of whom say they were raised Jewish. All in all, only 30% of America's religiously unaffiliated adults say they were brought up as nones: roughly the same proportion who were cradle Catholics, and rather less than the percentage raised as some kind of Protestant (see Figure 1.2). That adds up to around 41 million nonverts. To put that figure in perspective, it's roughly equal to the adult populations of California and Pennsylvania, the nation's first and fourth most populous states, *combined*.

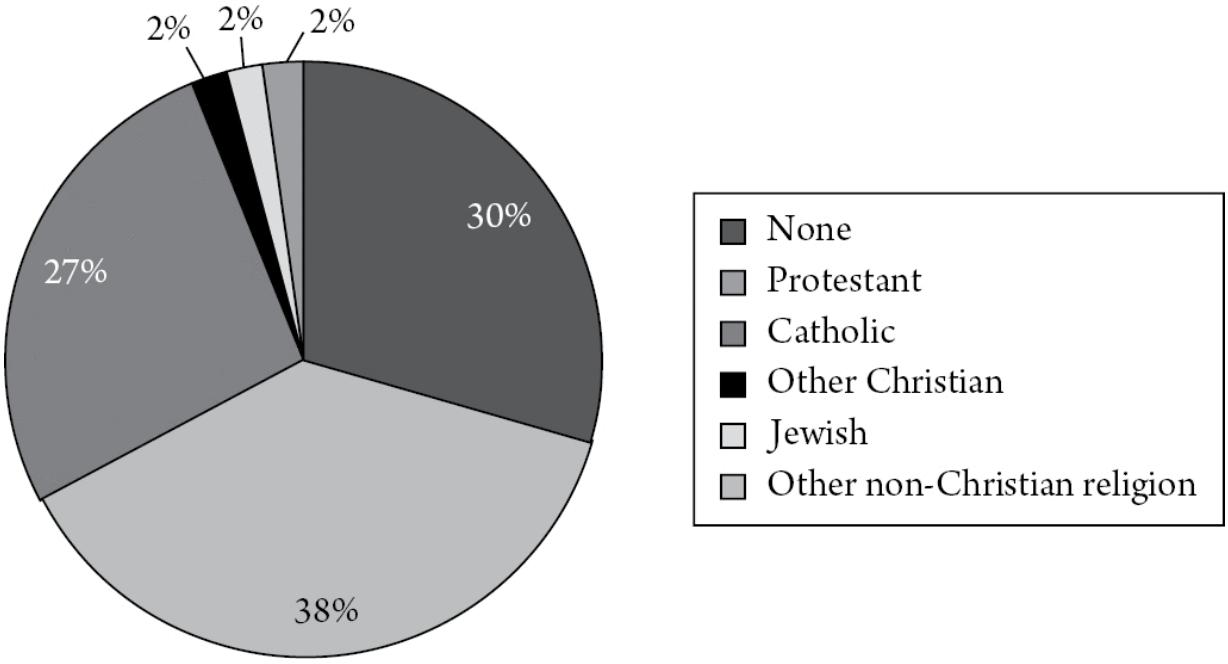

Figure 1.2 Religious upbringing of US adults with no religion.
Source: General Social Survey (2018; weighted data)

But why, exactly, is this so important?

First off, large-scale religious change tends to happen gradually. Throughout history, most people, most of the time, have kept whatever religion they happened to be brought up in. People *do* convert—or "switch"—from one religious or denominational identity to another, but even rare periods of "mass conversion" typically only affect hundreds, or

perhaps thousands, of people. No doubt there are exceptions to this general rule, but if so, then they are just that—exceptions. Instead, even the most dramatic examples of religious growth or decline tend to occur over many generations. Birth and retention rates are often key here: hence the growing numbers, generation by generation, of the Amish or Haredi Jews (neither of whom attract especially many converts). Even a fairly modest-looking rate of increase, when sustained over a long period, can very quickly add up, as anyone with a mortgage or student loan will know all too well. Immigration helps too, especially if those immigrants themselves have lots of children. This playbook certainly served Catholics and Mormons well, for example, in previous generations.[2]

But the rise of the nones is not due to a sudden influx from more secular shores. Nor is it down to nonreligious parents typically raising quivers full of nonreligious babies. Instead, it's primarily due to a vast, wholly unprecedented "mass nonversion" of millions upon millions of Americans who were raised religious. Indeed, if this book contains any single, summarizable argument it is that the USA is in the midst of a social, cultural, and religious watershed—one that today's Americans are not merely living *through*, but millions have actively *lived out* in their own stories. This shift, while in many (not all) cases a very gradual one from the perspective of an individual lifetime, has manifested itself at the national level very swiftly indeed. It was less than twenty years ago that major newspapers started reporting on "the rise of the nones": the earliest example I can find is from December 2003 by Dan Lattin, titled "Living the Religious Life of a None." (Pleasingly, this also includes the "no, not *nuns*" joke that has been used in every church PowerPoint presentation on "mission and outreach" ever since. I hope Lattin gets royalties.) Fast-forward eighteen years, and none-specific headlines appear atop everything from earnest political think-pieces to such relatable *Buzzfeed* listicles as "21 Awkward Situations That'll Make Non-Religious People Cringe."

Second—and relatedly—by foregrounding nonverts specifically, over and above nones-in-general, I'm attempting to stress something significant that is often overlooked. Sociologists have been aware for some years that "ex-" identities are not simply descriptions of people's *pasts*: in many subtle and not-so-subtle ways, they influence people's current personalities, beliefs, feelings, circumstances, relationships, and a great deal else.[3] In truth, and as is often the case, the sociologists are late in catching up on

what common sense screams at us. For example, an ex-girlfriend or ex-wife is in a special class of woman, forever different from all those other women who are not now, *and never were*, one's love interests. This has potentially very concrete personal and social ramifications if one does not properly recognize, and act in due accordance with, this "social fact."[4] Similarly, to be a "recovering alcoholic" is a statement about both past *and* present. And it's worlds apart from being a lifelong teetotaler, though both don't currently drink alcohol. The roles and relationships we *used to* have can exert powerful sway over our current selves. And the way we feel about our past covers a wide spectrum of emotions—loss, longing, affection, alienation, liberation, trauma, regret, anger, gratitude—in any manner of conflicting combinations. As we shall see, this is often very much the case when it comes to people's ex-religious identities, too.

* * *

Of course, what it means for an individual to go from being a Christian to being "nonreligious" diverges greatly from what it means for a whole country to go from being a predominantly Christian nation—the "city on a hill" so beloved of Winthrop and Reagan—to . . . well, it's going to be interesting to find out. Accordingly, this book operates on two levels. Very much to the fore will be the individual experiences of American nonverts. Just like classical conversion stories, each person's nonversion narrative is unique to them. Yet also like converts' testimonies, when one has listened to enough of them, common causes and influences, trends, and tropes do start to emerge. These do not manifest themselves in a set number of predefined paths, such that if a person has or does A, B, and C, then she will inevitably wind up at point Z. But one tends to see the same palette of experiences, albeit endlessly remixed, cropping up again and again. This is most apparent, not surprisingly, among people who started out in the same kind of religion to begin with. As we shall see, nones who were brought up as evangelicals, for all their internal diversity, make up a relatively coherent group when compared to ex-Catholics, ex-Mormons, or ex-mainliners: further proof of the ongoing significance of American denominationalism.[5] Likewise, an ironically ecumenical federation of ex-Christians—"that they may all be none" (with apologies to John 17:21)—would tend to have more in common with each other than they would with similar coalitions of ex-Jews or ex-Muslims. Reaching the point where you no longer identify with

any religion, even nominally, will naturally be a rather different journey if you were brought up in a Black Pentecostal family in the Sunbelt than if you were raised a middle-of-the-road Episcopalian in New England. But it won't *just* be the starting point and route that are different. So too, in all likelihood, will the destination be. That is, your personal brand of nonreligiosity—your "noneness"—will be very different from that of your WASP-ish doppelgänger.

Alongside chapters focusing on individuals, I'll also sketch out the big picture. I say big, but I really mean huge: more or less the whole canvas of US social, cultural, religious, economic, and political life, both now and over the past thirty, fifty, or eighty years. Obviously, we will have to be very selective. This big picture is necessary for two reasons. In the first place, *Homo sapiens* is "by nature a social animal."[6] Our lives are not self-contained. They are intimately bound up with the lives of our families, friends, neighbors, and co-workers, obviously enough. But they are also enmeshed, in a million subtle ways, with individuals, groups, and movements that we have perhaps never met. Our lives are shaped by everything from the global economy to our social media feeds: everything, that is, that makes up our cultural backdrop. While our own ideas, attitudes, emotions, and actions are not simply the products of all these inputs, we are constantly influenced in all manner of ways. And we too, in turn, influence others.

Scholars have long noted the importance of one's family, one's peer group, the local or regional religious "microclimate," and the wider culture in affecting a person's becoming and/or remaining religious. It is easier to end up a Jehovah's Witness if one's parents consciously bring you up as one than it is if they bring you up as a Hare Krishna.[7] Falling in with a new crowd is a clear predictor of conversion to new religious movements and mainstream religions alike.[8] It feels much more easy and natural to be a "Bible-believing" Christian in Texas than it does in the Pacific Northwest.[9] If all this is true for the acquiring and maintaining of religious identities, it should apply equally to the drifting, weakening, losing, and discarding of them, too. And it does. What I mean is that each of the myriad, unique narratives plays out, and only makes sense within, a much bigger social and cultural landscape. Each nonvert has, if you like, his or her own personal subplot within some epic saga.

This particular saga has a logic and significance all its own. We already know that religion, and the loss of it, *matters* to people. This can take many forms: in the pages that follow are stories of loss and gain, comedy and tragedy, pain and joy, devastation and liberation. It is not only religious people to whom it matters, either. The mini-industry of "New Atheist" books, blogs, YouTube channels, and meet-up groups (on which more later) that began about fifteen years ago is proof enough that there are many committed nonreligious folks for whom religion matters a great deal. One has to think something is very important indeed to devote one's time, energy, and resources to fighting it. (That is not, I might add, a veiled claim that such devoted secularists are themselves, in their deepest Freudian psyches, secretly religious. One can devote one's whole life to fighting something—whether malaria, the New World Order, or the improper use of apostrophes—without secretly being in love with it.)

This importance of religion is not, moreover, confined to the private sphere. The various roles that religious groups have played in US political debates, often on both sides, are well known. Recent years have also seen the growing prominence of *nonreligious* political influencers—the Freedom from Religion Foundation, the Secular Coalition for America, the American Humanist Association—riding the rising tide of nones and, indeed, receiving a newly warm reception from politicos keen to court this demographic (whether they will be as politically successful as their conservative religious counterparts very much remains to be seen).[10] Outside of the Beltway Bubble, (non)religious identities correlate in complex ways with all manner of concrete concerns. One's religious identity, or lack thereof, can be a good predictor not only of one's beliefs, attitudes, and values on a wide range of topics, but also with such very practical things as health outcomes, happiness levels, and suicide rates.[11] Cause and effect can be very difficult to prove, or even guess at. But this doesn't affect our basic point. Either religion itself matters, or it is intimately bound up with other things that matter. Either way, the kinds of major religious changes afoot in America surely augur significant shifts of other types, too.

* * *

In the following chapter, we'll embark on the first of four denominational "deep dives," exploring nonversion in contemporary Mormonism.

Analogous chapters on mainline Protestantism, evangelicalism, and Catholicism will follow. These chapters will aim to show that for all the talk of the "nones," and as much as they may have in common, it makes no more sense to talk about them as an undifferentiated mass than it would to talk about, say, Christians that way. The label "none" masks a great deal of diversity. By looking, rather, at "nonverts," these chapters will demonstrate that the factors pushing people toward nonversion vary considerably depending on the religious tradition they are leaving, and that those factors linger long after they have left the fold. Alternating with these will be broader, thematic chapters exploring "who" precisely America's nones and nonverts are, how and why nonreligiosity rapidly grew—*seemingly* out of nowhere—and what I'm calling the "Ex Effect," meaning how what you used to be affects who you are. The final chapter will conclude with some speculation about the likely future of post-Christian America. Before all that, though, a word or two about the types of evidence that *Nonverts* is based upon.

In the years just prior to the pandemic, I had the pleasure of flying and driving around several states—Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas—interviewing nones of all backgrounds, ranging in age from eighteen (a Black, former Seventh-day Adventist man, in New York City) to seventy-eight (a White, ex-Methodist woman, in Portland, Oregon). Two research assistants also conducted interviews for me, in Minnesota and Tennessee. Participants were recruited through various channels, including existing personal networks and online message boards. All in all, we recorded detailed interviews, ranging from forty minutes to a couple of hours, with seventy people. To preserve their anonymity, names and other reasonable identifying characteristics have been changed or omitted. Naturally, I hope my portrayal of them is sufficiently faithful that they are still able to recognize themselves where and when they feature in these pages.

In addition to the rich three-dimensionality one only gets from qualitative study, this book also presents quantitative data from high-quality, nationally representative social surveys. Most of these come from my own analyses of the biennial General Social Survey (GSS), administered by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. Though drawing most heavily from the 2018 wave, I will occasionally make use of the full dataset going back to 1972. Other leading data sources, for example the

regular surveys done by Pew, Gallup, or the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), will also appear where useful. But the GSS, for good though boring reasons, will be our go-to data.[12] Unless otherwise stated, assume that any statistics cited are from there.

Finally, I have been researching and writing about American and European nonreligiosity, in all its myriad types and shades, for around fifteen years. Over roughly this same period—not that I'm claiming any credit—the interest of other sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and historians has grown immeasurably.[13] There has suddenly arisen a wealth of pioneering research probing all manner of nonreligious phenomena, big and small. One of my hopes for this book is to bring some of this fascinating and innovative work, much of it buried behind journal paywalls or in expensive academic books, to a wider audience. Naturally, the evidence, ideas, and arguments put forward here reflect, build upon, and (not infrequently) disagree with this body of scholarship. In the interests of readability, citations, suggestions for further reading, technical discussions, and personal tangents have mostly been confined to the endnotes. They are there for the benefit of readers who like or need these kinds of academic accoutrements. Others may simply allow their eyes to skim over the little numbers floating in the text, safe in the knowledge that they're mainly missing out on bibliographic details and dad jokes.