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The Religiosity of the U.S. Nonprofit Sector and Its Impact on Secular Women

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Despite its decline, Christianity continues to influence the everyday lives of atheists, agnostics, and other kinds of nonbelievers in the United States.¹ Politically, Christianity's influence remains clear in debates about abortion or the teaching of evolution in public schools.² At the level of the state, Christianity's influence often determines what *cannot* be present. Very few elected officials are openly nonreligious and the U.S. government only rarely acknowledges nonreligious beliefs systems like humanism.³ In everyday life, Christianity's influence is structural, making it difficult to perceive: it determines what "religion" means, accords religious rights to some and not others, and establishes the terms in which nonbelievers understand themselves.⁴

This chapter considers the religious history of the U.S. nonprofit sector and examines how its Protestant normativity impacts secular women. The ways that secular women care for their families, raise their children, and support their local communities reflect the U.S.

¹ Isabella Kasselstrand, Phil Zuckerman, and Ryan T. Cragun, *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2023); David Voas and Mark Chaves, "Is the United States a Counterexample to the Secularization Thesis?," *American Journal of Sociology* 121, no. 5 (March 1, 2016): 1517–56, <https://doi.org/10.1086/684202>.

² Christopher P. Toumey, "Evolution and Secular Humanism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61, no. 2 (July 1, 1993): 275–301, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/LXI.2.275>.

³ "Humanist, Atheist, Agnostic and Nonreligious Elected Officials," Center for Freethought Equality, accessed April 28, 2023, <https://www.cfequality.org/secular-elected-officials>; Russell Contreras, "When Congress Is More Christian and Religious than the Rest of America," *Axios*, April 23, 2023, <https://www.axios.com/2023/04/23/lawmakers-more-religious-general-public>; Joseph Blankholm, "Secularism and Secular People," *Public Culture* 30, no. 2 (2018): 245–68.

⁴ Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005); Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Tisa Wenger, *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Joseph Blankholm, *The Secular Paradox: On the Religiosity of the Not Religious* (New York: New York University Press, 2022).

government's continued reliance on religion to administer even basic social services. By choosing to be nonreligious, these women gain what they understand to be freedom from traditional religion. At the same time, they feel religion's absence in ways that are often distinct from men's experiences and distinct from women's experiences in other parts of the world. The extra burdens that secular women bear are evidence of the U.S. state's dependence on religion, just as they reflect the patriarchy of U.S. culture and the fact that domestic labor continues to be primarily women's work. These burdens are not only products of a distinctively American history, but also of a deeper Euroamerican inheritance that shapes the proper roles of religion and women alike.⁵

This chapter is organized into four parts. In the first section, I distill a conversation I had with a woman whom I call "Catherine," who was the first person to draw my attention to the unique burdens that secular women bear in the U.S. Following Catherine's lead, I highlight the uniqueness of the American configuration of religion, state, and society by comparing the U.S. to some countries in Europe.⁶ In the second section, to support Catherine's analysis, I sketch a brief history of American civil society and the ways in which the U.S. government relies on Christianity and other religions to provide basic social services. In the section that follows, I analyze the growth of the U.S. nonprofit sector as part of a larger turn to neoliberalism, and I draw a comparison between the creative destruction of the American economy and the creative destruction of secular women who replace religion. In the fourth section, I rely on ethnographic research and a survey I fielded to share secular women's experiences in their own words. I

⁵ Joan Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

⁶ On "secularism" as the relationship among the state, religion, and society, see Alfred Stepan, "The Multiple Secularisms of Modern Democratic and Non-Democratic Regimes," in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig J. Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Oxford, N.Y: Oxford University Press, 2011), 114–44.

conclude by suggesting how this chapter can contribute to explaining the state's indirect role in the so-called "gender gap" in American religiosity.

I focus specifically on the burdens that secular women bear when caring for their families, raising children, and sustaining their broader community because women told me time and again that these parts of life become extra difficult without the support of organized religion. By contrast, none of the nonreligious men whom I interviewed or spent time with during my ethnographic field research noted the impact of religion's absence on their family lives. In other words, because patriarchy remains pervasive in the U.S., domestic labor remains a highly gendered concern. Observing the intense asymmetry of this concern should not be confused with claiming that domestic labor is naturally or essentially women's. Indeed, my aim is to critique prevailing norms by showing how the centuries-long cozy relationship between religion and the U.S. state burdens women in general and especially those who are secular. I should also note that while many Americans lead fulfilling lives without marrying or having children, those who do embrace normative family life face distinct challenges that are both important to acknowledge and illustrative as symptoms of larger social forces. By focusing squarely on the challenges of family life for women, my aim is to reveal some of the overlooked symptoms of the U.S. state's relationship with religion and the Protestant normativity of its nonprofit sector.

Catherine's Nonreligious Burdens

This chapter relies in part on several years of ethnographic research among secular activists and everyday nonbelievers in the United States. By nonbelievers I mean people who understand themselves to be atheists, agnostics, humanists, or freethinkers, though many also identify with more obscure labels like naturalist, rationalist, skeptic, or apatheist. From 2012

through 2018, I conducted more than a hundred interviews with the leaders, former leaders, and everyday members of groups formed by and for nonbelievers. Some of these groups have a national presence, like the Center for Inquiry (CFI), the American Humanist Association (AHA), and the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF). Other groups are small, local, and sometimes short-lived.⁷ These small communities organize on Meetup.com, through email listservs, or by word-of-mouth; they sometimes meet as much as once a week, though they might also go months without meeting; and they are usually led by volunteer organizers. I also participated in dozens of conferences, workshops, training sessions, and other kinds of events that nonbelievers organize. Over time, I became deeply familiar with the variety of ways that nonbelievers live their nonreligion, and I grew to understand their intractable sources of disagreement.⁸

Most of those whom I interviewed during my research I reached by chain referral, either through formal introduction or through recommendation and the use of publicly available contact information. Interviews were semi-structured and covered a wide range of topics, including organizational and personal history, interorganizational cooperation, and the constellation of labels used by nonbelievers. Conforming with ethnographic norms, I have guaranteed the anonymity of those with whom I spoke by assigning them pseudonyms and changing their identifying biographical details. This is what I have done with “Catherine,” whom I met several times during my years of field research.

Catherine convinced me of the unique burden that secular women bear when I was interviewing her in her office in Washington D.C. in 2016. After more than two decades as a

⁷ Alfredo García and Joseph Blankholm, “The Social Context of Organized Nonbelief: County-Level Predictors of Nonbeliever Organizations in the United States,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 55, no. 1 (2016): 70–90.

⁸ Blankholm, *The Secular Paradox: On the Religiosity of the Not Religious*.

high-level Republican insider, Catherine was hired to run a prominent lobbying group for secular people in 2012. She is witty and charming, if always careful and a little guarded, so I was grateful to sit down with her for two long interviews about a wide range of topics, including her experiences as a secular woman. In her work in the secular activist movement, Catherine has traveled the world visiting nonbeliever groups, which has given her an unusually broad perspective on their diversity. Her insights into the unique challenges that secular women face in the U.S. are worth quoting at length:

I'm a prime target for a local [nonbeliever] group. I've been to the local CFI [Center for Inquiry] meetings. I've been to the local AHA [American Humanist Association] meetings. I've been to those Meetup groups. I don't like them. I'll tell you why. When I traveled the country [visiting local nonbeliever communities], the biggest complaint I got was mainly from the ladies. The atheist movement is predominantly male because it's more based around science, and there are more men in the science field than women. The [typical] group is all about drinking skeptically, complaining about religion, and the latest narcissistic person on a book tour. You have less women there. Women are starting to come into the [secular] movement, but quite a few would try local groups and find them not relevant to their life. They were more interested in solutions for practical daily problems. With women, the burden falls on them for child-rearing. The husband's parents are elderly and need help—that falls on them. Somebody's getting married, all those arrangements. Somebody's dying. The kid needs some kind of naming ceremony. They're responsible for that world, so they're looking for those services. Religion's big in that service. Planning family holidays. So most of the men, they would say they cared about those things, and they would say, "I can contribute money, but I can't contribute any time. I want it taken care of. I'll work and make money, but I'm not the right guy to worry about mom, dad, funerals, marriages, getting kids into college, getting into preschool, getting the healthcare, all that." That's traditionally something more females are doing in society. And when you're out there trying to fill all those needs, you're constantly bumping up against religion as a major provider. Sometimes, I've heard jokes. I'm sure you have, too. Men will say, "I'm thinking about the multiverse, and I'm worried," and a woman will say, "I have a kid I'm trying to get to college this summer. How do I get them moved and get them into a safe environment?"

As Catherine describes, women bear the burden of nonreligion disproportionately in the U.S. because in American families, domestic work like caring for extended family and raising

children mostly remains women's labor.⁹ That secular women so rarely have organizations like churches that they can turn to for support only heavies their burden.

Catherine is aware that the United States is somewhat unique. Life-cycle rituals, like weddings and memorial services, remain largely modeled on Christian versions, and there is a lack of institutional support for alternatives for secular people. She described how life is different for nonbelievers in some countries in Europe:

There are models, fantastic models, in Europe. I know in Switzerland and in Germany, they have a three percent tax for religion. If you're born Catholic or Protestant, that money goes to that church. They have more money than they know what to do with because they don't have people going to church anymore. I was in Finland in April, and there the government pays for people's burials. The humanist association there is in the business of burials, and that's where they get most of their millions of dollars. They handle the whole burial. Their membership is way up because everybody knows they're going to die, and they're going to need to be affiliated with a group that handles burials. And they also handle weddings. I was in Iceland just a couple of weeks ago and met with a group there. They have finally gotten their official status, and their membership has exploded, and they're getting money from the government for confirmations for early teens. Just sort of a coming-of-age ceremony. And it's not religious, but people are used to having that in society. It's beautiful. It's not a bad thing for a twelve-year-old to go through some classes to talk about being a responsible citizen of the world and what it means to be an adult. So that's a value for society, so they're getting funding from the government to provide that for the people who don't want to label themselves as Catholic or Protestant. These are services people care about and will pay for. They're not free. They're not really free at a church. There are fees. You're being leaned on for donations. You're given a copy of the church's budget every year, and you're expected to contribute.

Speaking off the cuff, Catherine did not remember the details of German and Swiss religion taxes exactly right (the taxes are more complicated than a flat three percent), but she is right about the dearth of secular alternatives in the U.S. and right that in some European countries,

⁹ Sampson Lee Blair and Daniel T. Lichter, "Measuring the Division of Household Labor: Gender Segregation of Housework Among American Couples," *Journal of Family Issues* 12, no. 1 (March 1991): 91–113, <https://doi.org/10.1177/019251391012001007>; Jill E. Yavorsky, Claire M. Kamp Dush, and Sarah J. Schoppe-Sullivan, "The Production of Inequality: The Gender Division of Labor Across the Transition to Parenthood," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 77, no. 3 (June 2015): 662–79, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12189>.

taxpayers support religious and religion-like services.¹⁰ By contrast, in the United States, civil society, and especially religious nonprofits, are almost entirely responsible for providing services like weddings and funerals.¹¹ Ironically, state support for religion and religion-like alternatives can make religion less necessary, even as some secular people consider life-cycle rituals too religious.¹² Without non-religious institutions to support life-cycle rituals, Americans are less able to be indifferent to religion; they feel its absence more acutely, and they are more often spurred to engage it. The costs of time, effort, and money are real for secular people in the United States who still want life-cycle rituals and other parts of life that they associate with religion, even after they have left religious institutions and are now among the religiously unaffiliated.

Catherine emphasized this point when she told me about her own experience seeking religious services as a nonreligious person:

I needed all those things. [When I was] thirty-five years old, I went and joined a church to get a baby-naming ceremony. I schlepped in there and showed up at thirty-five years old, pregnant. Asked around everywhere. I went and interviewed all these rectors. The Episcopal Church was the most liberal and lenient. I had my baby, and I had to go through confirmation. I had to be thirty-five years old and have a bishop lay his hands on me so I could have a place to park my baby. I did it, and the rector knew I didn't believe in God. So I went three years. Baby one, baby two. Got my three celebrations, got my godparents lined up. Ten godmothers and ten godfathers. He had a service, and we gave the church a big donation, and we had a beautiful ceremony and announced the baby to the world. Big party at the house. Everybody flew in. My son is an atheist, and he decided that on his own, but he likes his godparents and having them in his life. Same for my daughter. Godparents are very helpful. My daughter loves the idea of her godmother.

¹⁰ "In Western European Countries With Church Taxes, Support for the Tradition Remains Strong" (Pew Research Center, Washington D.C., 2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2019/04/Church-Tax-in-Western-Europe-FOR-WEB-4.30.pdf>.

¹¹ Kathleen Garces-Foley, "Funerals of the Unaffiliated," *OMEGA* 46, no. 4 (2003 2002): 287–302; Per Smith, "Spitting With the Wind," *The New Humanism*, accessed August 31, 2013, <http://thenewhumanism.org/authors/per-smith/articles/spitting-with-the-wind>; Dusty Hoesly, ""Need a Minister? How About Your Brother?": The Universal Life Church between Religion and Non-Religion," *Secularism and Nonreligion* 4, no. 1 (October 23, 2015): Art. 12, <https://doi.org/10.5334/snr.be>.

¹² Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defense of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Bruce argues that a voluntarist model, like in the U.S., is a step beyond established churches in the process of secularization but can lead to more religious engagement in the near-term.

They send her gifts. They call her; they email her. They have networks around the world. They get to go and stay with them. These people are happy to have — many don't have children. They're happy to have godchildren. They're Jewish, they're atheist, whatever. Why not pick the best. The best tradition of what's out there and put it together and move forward. So I had to go use a church. They used me, and I used them, and I got what I wanted. That's how I feel.

Catherine joined a local Episcopal Church for reasons both cynical and sincere. Even though she did not believe in God and did not genuinely consider herself Episcopalian, attending a church and supporting it financially earned her the life-cycle rituals she sought for her children. The burden of cost and time was enormous, but in the end, she considered her compromise worth the reward.

Christianity as American Civil Society

The robust nonprofit sector in the U.S. today is a relatively recent development. The number of nonprofits in the U.S. grew from around 13,000 in 1940 to more than 1.5 million by the year 2000.¹³ As of 2021, there were roughly 1.8 million nonprofits registered with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), including both religious and secular.¹⁴ Though nonprofits are an important part of U.S. public life—and the U.S. social safety net—historian Peter Dobkin Hall has shown why the growth of the nonprofit sector is not necessarily a good thing. Consolidating so much private wealth into the voluntary sector, or civil society, rather than taxing it and passing it through government, poses serious dangers to American democracy.¹⁵ It shifts the administration of social services and public goods to philanthropists and away from the control

¹³ Peter Dobkin Hall, "A Historical Overview of Philanthropy, Voluntary Associations, and Nonprofit Organizations in the United States, 1600–2000," in *The Nonprofit Sector: A Research Handbook*, ed. Walter W. Powell and Patricia Bromley, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 32–65.

¹⁴ nLewis Faulk et al., "Nonprofit Trends and Impacts 2021" (Urban Institute, 2021),

https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/104889/nonprofit-trends-and-impacts-2021_2.pdf.on

¹⁵ Peter Dobkin Hall, "Philanthropy, the Nonprofit Sector & the Democratic Dilemma," *Daedalus* 142, no. 2 (2013): 139–58.

of elected officials, giving everyday people less power over their individual lives and their communities.

In some ways, religious nonprofits are special in the United States, and in others, they are no different from any legally incorporated organization. Unlike secular nonprofits and for-profit corporations, religious nonprofits do not need to file financial disclosure forms with the IRS.¹⁶ Churches are unique among religious organizations because they are automatically exempt from taxes; they do not need to register with the IRS in order to avoid paying them. In matters like hiring and firing, religious institutions also have special legal rights that exempt them from parts of legislation like the Americans with Disabilities Act. In *EEOC v. Hosanna-Tabor*, for instance, the Supreme Court decided that a Lutheran-church affiliated school could fire a teacher because she is narcoleptic.¹⁷

Despite these differences, religious nonprofits are similar to secular nonprofits and other American corporations because they have influenced one another and co-evolved in the same structural ecosystem, which has been shaped deeply by Protestantism. Historians Ruth H. Bloch and Naomi R. Lamoreaux have shown how government officials—usually Protestants—regulated civil society in the nineteenth century by deciding which groups could legally incorporate, which is to say, create a state-sanctioned legal fiction that possesses many of the rights of individual personhood.¹⁸ Hall has also elaborated the religious history of civil society in the United States and the role of Protestantism, in particular, in the development of America's

¹⁶ Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Major Evangelical Nonprofits Are Trying a New Strategy with the IRS That Allows Them to Hide Their Salaries," *Washington Post*, January 17, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/01/17/major-evangelical-nonprofits-are-trying-new-strategy-with-irs-that-allows-them-hide-their-salaries/>.

¹⁷ *Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and School v. EEOC* (565 U.S. 171 2012); Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *Church State Corporation: Construing Religion in US Law* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

¹⁸ Ruth Bloch and Naomi Lamoreaux, "Voluntary Associations, Corporate Rights, and the State: Legal Constraints on the Development of American Civil Society, 1750-1900" (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, May 2015), <https://doi.org/10.3386/w21153>.

thriving nonprofit sector.¹⁹ Protestants have shaped civil society in their own image. Regulated by many of the same laws and innovated under the same constraints, religious nonprofits and for-profit corporations continue to mirror one another. Religious Studies scholar Kathryn Lofton has argued convincingly that corporations and religious groups are often indistinguishable.²⁰

Though organizations that are legally sanctioned as “religious” continue to receive the largest percentage of all charitable contributions in the United States, it is impossible to calculate how many of these organizations there are because “religious congregations and organizations with less than \$5,000 in gross receipts are not required to register with the IRS,” and because most registered nonprofits do not report to the IRS every year.²¹ The religious subset of the nonprofit sector is the most economically important, but it is also the most difficult to observe.

The U.S. has strengthened its nonprofit sector in recent decades by relying on nonprofits to deliver government services rather than delivering them directly. Conservative politicians have used this strategy to bolster religious nonprofits, in particular. In 1996, the U.S. Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, which simultaneously eroded the U.S. welfare state and created the first government “faith-based initiatives.” The U.S. again ramped up its efforts to distribute government services through faith-based organizations after the election of George W. Bush in 2000. In 2001, President Bush created the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, though only a small fraction of the \$8 billion that the Bush administration promised to faith-based organizations was ever delivered.²² In recent years,

¹⁹ Dobkin Hall, “A Historical Overview of Philanthropy, Voluntary Associations, and Nonprofit Organizations in the United States, 1600–2000.”

²⁰ Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, Class 200: New Studies in Religion (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

²¹ “The Nonprofit Sector in Brief 2019” (Urban Institute: National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2020), <https://nccs.urban.org/publication/nonprofit-sector-brief-2019#the-nonprofit-sector-in-brief-2019>.

²² Rebecca Sager, *Faith, Politics, and Power: The Politics of Faith-Based Initiatives* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). 4.

around a third of the overall revenue that U.S. nonprofits receive comes from government contracts.²³ Nonprofits, and religious nonprofits in particular, are both an extension of the American government and a domain beyond its oversight.

Creative Destruction: The Push and Pull of Nonreligious Freedom

Given the important role that the U.S. government has assigned nonprofits in the deconstruction of its welfare state, it is no coincidence that the enormous growth of the nonprofit sector should coincide with the economic and structural trends toward privatization and atomization that have come to bear the name “neoliberalism.” Marxist geographer David Harvey characterizes neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”²⁴ In brief, this means “deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state.”²⁵

Because nonprofits are especially valuable in U.S. communities where the government fails to deliver adequate public services, the nonprofit sector has become a tool for market-based critique of government bloat. According to neoliberal theory, competition among nonprofits for government contracts to deliver public services is more efficient than a government agency delivering those same services. Breaking government into component parts and engaging those parts in competition are ways of introducing market logic into the welfare state. Awarding taxpayer funded contracts to non- and for-profit corporations and encouraging them to compete with

²³ “Nonprofit Impact Matters: How America’s Charitable Nonprofits Strengthen Communities and Improve Lives” (National Council of Nonprofits, 2019), nonprofitimpactmatters.org/site/assets/files/1/nonprofit-impact-matters-sept-2019-1.pdf.

²⁴ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

²⁵ Harvey, 3.

one another are ways of eroding government's structural importance by establishing alternatives to government administration and reducing the state to a financial intermediary.²⁶

To describe the damage wrought by the neoliberal revolution, Harvey borrows the phrase “creative destruction” from the economist Joseph Schumpeter, who uses it to describe the destructive forces inherent to economic innovation. Schumpeter draws on the economics of Karl Marx to name and identify “creative destruction,” which in Schumpeter’s theory will contribute to capitalism’s collapse.²⁷ “Creative destruction” was later used by neoliberals to label the process of downsizing that makes companies lean and agile in a competitive market.²⁸ Whether this creative destruction is good or bad is now in the eye of the beholder.

Secular life, including the lives of secular women, is a microcosm of these larger transformations. Many scholars of secularism have observed a close relationship among being secular, secularism, and the autonomous individual of liberal democratic nation-states.²⁹ On a more everyday level, sociologist Christel Manning has observed that nonreligious parents usually emphasize letting their children choose whether to be religious—and which religion to choose—rather than imposing “no religion” on them.³⁰ Kathryn Lofton has made a similar observation about the rise of child-rearing literature, reading it as a symptom of the atomization of the family

²⁶ Helmut K. Anheier and Lester M. Salamon, “The Nonprofit Sector in Comparative Perspective,” in *The Nonprofit Sector: A Research Handbook*, ed. Walter W. Powell and Patricia Bromley, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 89–114.

²⁷ Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 1st ed (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008).

²⁸ Richard L. Nolan and David C. Croson, *Creative Destruction: A Six-Stage Process for Transforming the Organization* (Boston, Mass: Harvard Business School Press, 1995).

²⁹ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2003); John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America: With Reference to Ghosts, Protestant Subcultures, Machines, and Their Metaphors: Featuring Discussions of Mass Media, Moby-Dick, Spirituality, Phrenology, Anthropology, Sing Sing State Penitentiary, and Sex with the New Motive Power*, Religion and Postmodernism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Scott, *Sex and Secularism*.

³⁰ Christel J. Manning, *Losing Our Religion: How Unaffiliated Parents Are Raising Their Children* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

and the increased burdens that neoliberalism places on individuals, especially women.³¹ In the absence of institutional support, secular women face more choices—and more difficult choices—than Americans who are embedded in religious communities that can benefit from tax deductions and the direct support of the U.S. government.

It is therefore also in this double sense, good and bad, that “creative destruction” is a fitting metaphor for secular women’s relationship with religion and the services that institutions like churches can provide. The negation that liberates secular women from religious belief, obligations, and traditions also generates a need to recreate what religious institutions and professionals have long provided. This destruction can be a joyful experience of freedom; it can also generate a burdensome, never-ending to-do list.

Listening to Secular Women

In addition to the many secular women I spoke with during the field research I conducted between 2012 and 2018, I have also learned from the secular women who responded to a survey I fielded. In March and April of 2021, the Secular Communities Survey (SCS) collected 12,370 valid responses from organized nonbelievers in the United States. For the purposes of the survey, “organized nonbelievers” are people who responded affirmatively in response to our screener question, “Have you ever belonged to a group or community, online or in-person, specifically for atheists, agnostics, humanists, or other kinds of nonbelievers?”³² These are the same groups I studied during my ethnographic research.

³¹ Kathryn Lofton, “Religion and the Authority in American Parenting,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 3 (September 1, 2016): 806–41, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfv124>.

³² See also Ryan T. Cragun, Christel Manning, and Lori L. Fazzino, *Organized Secularism in the United States: New Directions in Research* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017).

In response to open-ended questions asked on the SCS, many secular women wrote that they bear extra domestic burdens because they are secular. In this section, I give these women space to speak for themselves and describe their particular experiences of being nonreligious. The examples I focus on relate mostly to raising children and building supportive communities. In the background of the experiences these women describe are larger social forces like Christianity, neoliberalism, and patriarchy, which structure their lives and make their everyday demands uniquely theirs. The SCS is anonymous, so I identify the women by their age (which somewhat indicates their life-stage) and their location (since there are fewer secular people outside of major cities).

Secular women observe that childcare and other child-rearing needs are among their most difficult challenges.³³ For example, a woman who is fifty-one and lives outside of Denver, Colorado acknowledged that raising children without religion comes with certain social burdens:

[The] only downside to not being religious is wishing I could find more NON-religious people to hang out with. I live in a highly religious area, and there are so many family or mother/child groups that are part of churches. It would be nice to fit in. Religion is a huge part of several neighbors' lives, and I worry they'd reject our kids if they knew we're not religious.

Another woman, who is thirty-seven and lives in a suburb of Chicago, described how the COVID-19 pandemic made the task of finding secular families to socialize with more difficult: “It has been a challenge to find other atheists, as many people don’t self-identify as such. My spouse and I were looking into more in-person activities right when COVID-19 hit, to find other families with younger children to connect with.” For both women, raising children without religion is a mixed bag of freedom and the extra burdens that go along with it.

³³ For an excellent and far more thorough study of nonreligious parenting, see Manning, *Losing Our Religion*; Christel J. Manning, “Unaffiliated Parents and the Religious Training of Their Children,” *Sociology of Religion* 74, no. 2 (2013): 149–75.

Finding a community of like-minded nonbelievers can be especially important and especially difficult in parts of the U.S. that are religiously and politically conservative. A forty-four-year-old woman who lives in rural Pennsylvania said that community is one of the things she misses most about being religious. She elaborated: “Particularly now that I have a child it's frustrating that I feel like I'm setting her up to feel very alone in our conservative Christian area.”

A fifty-four-year-old woman, who lives in a rural area outside of Washington D.C., described how she hid her atheism while her children were growing up:

I live in a RED republican area, and I know that my children would have had repercussions if I would have said something when women I knew in the schools and volunteered with etc., talked about their churches and bible studies and wanted me to join their churches. They prayed if we ate out, etc. So I said nothing, for years, so that my kids wouldn't suffer from MY choices, my atheist views. My kids graduated college with Master's [degrees], and [are] out living their own lives now. So now, fuck it, I hold nothing back. I don't care what anyone thinks anymore.

Like Catherine, this woman's care for her children led her to compromise in public and hide her identity. Now that her kids are adults, she has unburdened herself of a social obligation she had taken seriously for decades.

Women also expressed how hard it can be to find a sense of community for themselves when they are nonreligious. A thirty-eight-year-old woman who lives outside of Dallas, Texas, told us, “Sometimes I miss having the instant belonging that comes with being a part of a religious group.” A thirty-nine-year-old woman who lives in a small town in northern Utah expressed a similar longing: “Having a community of people where I could make friends and who I could also rely on to help me during times of illness or emergency.” And a third woman, who is sixty-four and lives near Boca Raton, Florida, described how she has compromised in the past to fulfill her need for community: “Personally, I have participated in organized religion for the community aspects but am not either religious or spiritual.” Like Catherine, she was

religious—at least in some sense—despite not being a believer and not considering herself spiritual. Her compromises reflect her unique burdens.

Though many secular women reported a need for strong nonbeliever communities in their SCS responses, few have the option of joining a community that meets familial needs in the way that many religious communities can. At a workshop I attended in 2012 for leaders of nonbeliever communities, women repeatedly described how local nonbeliever communities fail to meet their needs, and they suggested that this failure makes it difficult for women to become secular. A woman named Kirstin described her ideal and how secular communities fall short:

My dream is to have an Ethical education program that meets at least twice a month. I feel like there are life-cycle issues where people drop out of the [secular] movement. People drop out after college and after they start having children and families. If you want women to come to your discussion groups, you need to have child care. If you have a picnic, you need games and stuff. We're growing toward that time when we can become a legitimate alternative to religious institutions. We aren't yet a legitimate alternative. We're just not.

A woman named Charlotte also talked about her ideal secular community: “I keep having these fantasies. If I won the lottery, I'd buy a building, and I'd have a Freethought Hall, or something, a place where you can take your children and have help like that and involvement with other people.”

Another woman, Debbie, who leads a community in Iowa, explained how catering to families completely changed the demographics of her group. She and other leaders wanted to make her community “more family friendly, so moms don't have to watch the kids while husbands come to events.” She said her community “started going to an arcade because it's a more kid-friendly venue,” and they now organize picnics on Memorial Day and Labor Day. Her community has grown to over a hundred people, and she told us that about half who attend are now families. Before this change, Debbie was often the only woman to attend events. The

overwhelming maleness of the group kept women away: “It was very intimidating for a new woman to come because all the men would hit on the one new woman. They had to make a rule that they would leave the one woman alone.” Though these men’s inappropriate behavior cannot be solely blamed on the scarcity of women in their community, in Debbie’s perception, recruiting more families solved the problem.

The experiences of Kirstin, Charlotte, and Debbie resonate with Catherine’s theory that many secular women want to be able to join religion-like communities for secular people but that the communities that exist mostly cater to men. The absence of strong secular communities in many parts of the U.S. means that secular women lack adequate support from a community of like-minded nonbelievers. Without access to tax-supported or church-subsidized ritual specialists and family services, secular women bear the burden of their nonreligious freedom disproportionately.

Conclusion

I began this chapter with Catherine’s insight that nonreligious women experience unique burdens in the United States. I then supported Catherine’s claims by showing the religious origins of the U.S. nonprofit sector and the special privileges that American law affords religious nonprofits, especially churches. I then showed how the U.S. nonprofit sector has grown rapidly over the past several decades and how this growth is part of a larger trend toward neoliberalism. Within this reorganized regime, religious nonprofits occupy a privileged role and have extra support from efforts like the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. The

structural benefits of being religious continue to be awarded to those who can successfully mimic Protestantism.³⁴

Sometimes secular communities are successful enough at playing the Protestant game that they can benefit from tax breaks and government grants. But more often than not, secular people in the U.S. live in religion's large remainder.³⁵ Secular women, in particular, feel religion's structural absence in their everyday domestic lives. The burdens they experience are symptoms of larger social forces like Christian influence, trends toward neoliberalism, and a patriarchal division of domestic labor (which is consistent with Christianity, though not distinctive to it, since patriarchy prevails among secular people, too).³⁶

These structural forces can also help us understand some of the reasons that women remain more religious than men in the United States, which is not the case in many other western countries.³⁷ Social scientists have long recognized a so-called "gender gap" between the religiosity of men and women. Some have explained this difference in biological terms, arguing that leaving religion is socially risky and that testosterone makes men less risk averse.³⁸ Women, so the argument goes, are less willing to suffer the stigma of being secular. Others have explained this aversion to stigma by arguing that women face far more discrimination than men, so their continued engagement with religion is practical, rather than hormonal.³⁹ Supporting the

³⁴ Wenger, *We Have a Religion*; Nongbri, *Before Religion*.

³⁵ Blankholm, *The Secular Paradox: On the Religiosity of the Not Religious*.

³⁶ Scott, *Sex and Secularism*.

³⁷ Joseph O. Baker and Andrew L. Whitehead, "Gendering (Non)Religion: Politics, Education, and Gender Gaps in Secularity in the United States," *Social Forces* 94, no. 4 (June 2016): 1623–45, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sov119>.

³⁸ Landon Schnabel, "How Religious Are American Women and Men? Gender Differences and Similarities," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54, no. 3 (2015): 616–22; Landon Schnabel, "The Gender Pray Gap: Wage Labor and the Religiosity of High-Earning Women and Men," *Gender & Society* 30, no. 4 (August 2016): 643–69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243216644884>.

³⁹ Penny Edgell, Jacqui Frost, and Evan Stewart, "From Existential to Social Understandings of Risk: Examining Gender Differences in Nonreligion," *Social Currents* 4, no. 6 (2017): 556–74.

view that religious differences are not biologically innate, other scholars have found that the religious gender gap varies not only across cultures, but also within religion.⁴⁰

Catherine's theory provides a helpful supplement for understanding the state's role in the ostensible gender gap in U.S. religiosity. In a patriarchal society like the United States, certain domestic responsibilities fall disproportionately on women. Because American civil society, including religion, has long delivered services that help women bear these burdens, leaving religion is more difficult for women, especially if they have families. As neoliberalism further atomizes both families and the welfare state, the burden on secular women grows. By contrast, in some countries in Europe, government has replaced some of these services because their welfare states are more robust and because they configure the relationship between church and state differently, allowing direct taxpayer support for both conventionally religious and nontheistic clergy. The persistence of patriarchy despite an increasing number of women entering the workforce makes life-cycle rituals and services like childcare important needs for secular women and thus important services for secular communities to offer. For some women, these resources are indispensable, so like Catherine, they seek them where they can, including in religions they do not consider their own.

The difficult choices that nonreligious women face when raising children and caring for their families are symptoms of a broader reality in the U.S., in which religious organizations provide vital support. The everyday experiences of nonreligious women point to the structural importance of religious support because they show how challenging it is to reject religion. That many nonbeliever communities fail to replace the services that religious communities provide

⁴⁰ Landon Schnabel, "More Religious, Less Dogmatic: Toward a General Framework for Gender Differences in Religion," *Social Science Research* 75 (September 1, 2018): 58–72, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2018.06.010>.

tells its own interesting story. Sometimes nonbelievers want to avoid forming communities at all because they seem too religious. Even when they do form communities, they often emphasize reading groups or lectures and avoid elements that feel too much like religion. Secular people's aversion to religion and to translating elements like religious ritual into secular analogues exacerbates women's challenges. Anxieties about seeming too religious contribute to secular women like Catherine turning to religion to find what they need.⁴¹ The absence of support for secular women's domestic labor is partly due to Christianity, partly due to neoliberalism, partly due to patriarchal divisions of labor, and partly due to secular people's own unwillingness to resemble religion too much. These entangled forces shape secular women's lives and leave them with more than their fair share to bear.

⁴¹ Blankholm, *The Secular Paradox: On the Religiosity of the Not Religious*.