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# Unaffiliated Parents and the Religious Training of Their Children

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*This article examines how parents who are religiously unaffiliated make decisions about the religious upbringing of their children. Drawing on qualitative data, this study explores the diverse worldviews that are included within the term “None” and how those beliefs are reflected or not reflected in the way parents raise their children. The article identifies four distinct worldviews among unaffiliated parents and identifies five different strategies that parents use to incorporate religion in the lives of their children. The article then analyzes the relationship between parent worldviews and actions, with particular attention to secular unaffiliated parents who incorporate religion in the upbringing of their children and to religious unaffiliated parents who do not. In addition to providing empirical data about unaffiliated parents, the article engages the wider debate about what it means to be religious or secular. It calls for more attention to salience, not just of religion but of secular worldviews, and offers parent actions vis-a-vis the religious upbringing of their children as a concrete measure of how much religion matters.*

*Key words:* unchurched; lived religion; secular; unaffiliated; religious Nones; children; salience; identity.

Over the past 30 years, research has documented a growing number of Americans who are unaffiliated or have no religious preference. Recent reports (Kosmin and Keysar 2009; Pew 2008) of a doubling in the proportion of Americans who claim no religion (frequently dubbed “Nones”) has led to increased scholarly interest in this segment of the population. We now know more about the demographic characteristics of the unaffiliated. For instance, although they are more likely to be young and male and live in certain parts of the country, they increasingly resemble the “average American” (Baker and Smith 2009; Kosmin and Keysar 2008). We also know more about their religious characteristics. While a small percentage are atheist, most are not irreligious but rather exhibit a wide diversity of religious, spiritual, and

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philosophical worldviews (Fuller 2001; Stark, Hamburg, and Miller 2005). Recent studies have closely examined various segments of the unaffiliated population such as unchurched Christians (Jamieson 2002, 2006), young people (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997), and atheists (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 2006; Ecklund and Lee 2011; Pasquale 2010; Smith 2011; Zuckerman 2007).

This article examines a subset of the unaffiliated that has received little attention, parents, and explores how they make decisions about the religious upbringing of their children. Understanding unaffiliated parents is important for several reasons. First, the future growth of the unaffiliated contingent will depend in part on what the current generation of Nones teaches their children. Examining if and how unaffiliated parents incorporate religion into the upbringing of their children also offers a window on “lived religion,” suggesting new ways of thinking about their religious identity. This, in turn, sheds light on the larger debate over how to define religion and secularity.

Several studies have shown that individuals who received religious training, especially in the home, are more likely to be churched as adults (Hood et al. 1996; Hunsberger 1976; Hunsberger and Brown 1984). Other research indicates that the unchurched are less likely to provide religious training to their children than churched Americans (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997; Gallup, Inc. 1978, 1988). Although previous studies indicate that some unaffiliated parents do seek a religious upbringing for their children, we do not know much about how and why they do that. The Gallup surveys of Unchurched Americans (1988) showed a significant gap between the number of unaffiliated parents who say they wanted religious education for their children (73 percent) and those who were actually providing it (48 percent). But Gallup did not ask why this was so, or about what kind of religious education they might want. The American Religious Identification Survey (Kosmin and Keysar 2008) did not ask parents who identified as having no religious preference about the religious upbringing of their children, unless respondents were in a mixed marriage. Pew’s American Religious Landscape Survey (2008) reports that 35 percent of the unaffiliated send their children to Sunday school, but they did not ask why or how they made this decision, or what kind of Sunday school it was (there are Christian, Jewish, and even atheist varieties).

The first study to ask these kinds of questions was published by Ecklund and Lee (2011) who investigated why some secular scientists attend a church and raise their children with religion. They found the primary reason was marriage to a religious spouse, although the desire for community and providing the children with religious choices were also important. But that study was limited to a narrow segment of the None population: scientists at elite universities who self-identify as atheist or agnostic. Most unaffiliated Americans are *not* atheists or scientists, and not all are married to religious individuals. By contrast, this article considers unaffiliated Americans who hold a range of religious, spiritual, and secular worldviews. How do those worldviews shape the way that parents think about and, perhaps most importantly, *act upon* the

question of incorporating religion into the lives of their children? How do the decisions made by secular unaffiliated parents compare with those who identify as religious or spiritual? For example, Ecklund and Lee describe how atheist parents who raise their children with religion reconcile this decision with their own nonreligious worldview. But we should also ask what kinds of narratives are constructed by unaffiliated parents who claim they *are* religious or spiritual but choose *not* to incorporate religion in the lives of their children.

In investigating these questions, this article also contributes to the sociological effort to improve the way we define religious identity. Many studies rely on quantifiable measures such as religious preference, organizational affiliation, belief in God, or attendance at religious services. Scholars such as Purpora (2001) have argued that people's professed religious identity often has little bearing on how they live their lives, and Ammerman (2006), McGuire (2008), and others have called for attention to religious practice or "lived religion." Lived religion can be difficult to assess because it requires consideration of qualitative data such as the way in which religion or spirituality is incorporated into an individual's personal life and what that means to them. That is particularly true for the unaffiliated for whom private spiritual practice may be the only form they engage in. This article draws on such qualitative data to distinguish different types of religious identity among the unaffiliated and then explores various ways in which those identities inform an important aspect of lived religion: how parents raise their children.

Finally, this article contributes to the ongoing debate over whether the growth in the unaffiliated population signifies a rise in secularization or something else. Several scholars have interpreted the increase in Nones as a sign of alienation from dominant religious institutions rather than a rejection of religion per se (Finke and Stark 2005; Gallup, Inc. 1978, 1988; Hout and Fisher 2002; Stark, Hamburg, and Miller 2005). Others (Fuller 2001; Roof 1999) argue that we may be seeing a broader cultural turn toward a more pluralistic religious outlook. And, a few argue that some parts of the population are in fact becoming more secular (Kosmin and Keysar 2008; Putnam and Campbell 2010). A problem underlying this debate is that the categories we use—unchurched, unaffiliated, None—define religion only in terms of belief and/or group membership, and secularity as the absence of those things. While this study takes the standard definition as a starting point to recruit participants, it explores additional dimensions of the so-called None worldview. In particular, it points to the necessity of attending to the salience in defining *both* religiousness and secularity. By salience I mean how important a person's religion or secular worldview is in their life and the extent to which it actually shapes their behavior. Many people claim a religious affiliation but are quite indifferent to religion or even spirituality, while many Nones care deeply about these matters (Purpora 2001; Putnam 2000). Atheists in particular can be more passionate about metaphysical and moral questions than some religious people and may develop a life philosophy that is functionally equivalent to religion

(Pasquale 2010). Assessing whether a person's worldview is religious or secular, and how much that matters to him or her, is most effective when it incorporates some observation of actual behavior. This study offers parental decision-making about their children's religious or secular upbringing as a concrete measure of such salience.

## METHODS

This study employed a grounded theory method of qualitative research (Corbin *et al.* 2007). The data presented here are based on observations and interviews of 48 religiously unaffiliated parents in the United States conducted between 2005 and 2007. The project was advertised in the greater Boston area; Hartford and New Haven, Connecticut; Jacksonville, Florida; Denver and Colorado Springs; San Francisco and Los Angeles. Participants were recruited via flyers posted at community notice boards, schools, preschools, and daycare centers, by circulating e-mail, and by word of mouth. People interviewed were asked for the names of others who might be interested in participating, creating a snowball sample. In order to focus on the current generation of None parents who are in the process of raising their children, the sample was restricted to respondents who self-identified as having no religious affiliation and who had children under 18 living in their home. Parents who were expecting their first child were included, but those whose children were already grown were excluded. Respondents selected ranged in age from 23 to 55, with an average age of 39. There were 16 men and 30 women. All but four were married; all were white and had completed at least some college; all were employed or supported by someone who was employed (I did not ask questions about income). Almost all respondents had themselves been raised with religion; their religious backgrounds included Catholic, mainline Protestant, conservative Protestant, Jewish, Mormon, Unitarian, and Bahai.

Although this study does not claim to generalize about the None population as a whole, it achieves varying degrees of "fit" with patterns that emerge from larger quantitative studies of the religiously unaffiliated population. Kosmin and Keysar (2008) who conducted ARIS suggest that Nones are no longer distinguished from average Americans by education, income, race, or marital status. However, age, gender, religious background, and region remain important factors. Perhaps because this study focused on a subset of the unaffiliated, families with children at home, most of my respondents were a little older than the typical unaffiliated person (a person in his early 20s). The study's focus on questions of childrearing probably also affected gender: my respondent pool was more female than the broader unaffiliated population (in which males outnumber females). On the other hand, my respondents are typical of two important characteristics of the unaffiliated population. One is religious background. Surveys show that most Nones do not start out that way

but choose to become unaffiliated as adults. According to ARIS 2008, 73 percent of Nones were raised in religious home; among my respondents all but three were raised with religion. Another characteristic is regional distribution. Surveys have noted important shifts in long-standing regional variations in religious affiliation (Silk 2005; Stump 1986). Until only a decade ago, the highest percentage of Nones were in the Pacific Northwest (states such as Oregon and Washington), with more than one-quarter of the population there claiming no religion, compared with 16 percent nationwide. Today, however, ARIS reports that there are two additional regions in the United States where Nones are concentrated: New England and the Mountain States. The majority (36) of my interviews were conducted in the latter two regions.

Interviews were conducted in person, using a semi-structured format, and usually lasted about an hour. Questions focused on two areas: (1) parent worldview (this included questions about the parent's own religious upbringing, reasons for ending affiliation, current status), and (2) decisions made about children (questions about whether or not they incorporated religion or spirituality into the home, the child's upbringing, whether or not they sought religious education, how and why). Information about the presence, proximity, or influence of grandparents, in-laws, and other extended family was not systematically gathered, but frequently emerged from the interview. All conversations were taped, then transcribed and all respondents were assigned pseudonyms. Transcribed interviews were manually coded for thematic content. Responses were then analyzed and categorized based on these emerging themes. Sampling of additional respondents continued during the coding process until thematic saturation was reached. During coding, demographic characteristics (such as religious background or geographical region) and certain objective responses (e.g., do you intentionally incorporate religion or spirituality in to your child's upbringing?) were entered into an Excel spreadsheet. This provided the basis for the tables presented in this article.

The purpose of this study was to examine how None parents make decisions about the religious upbringing of their children. Since the term "None" informs us only of what these parents lack (ties to organized religion), the first step was to seek a more substantive understanding of what these parents' worldviews actually are. In this study, four distinct types of worldview identities were observed; two of them may be characterized as religious, two as secular. The next step was to explore the decisions these parents made about incorporating religion in their children's upbringing. In this study, five distinct outcomes were observed, and only one of these, Nonprovision, was clearly secular. The final step was to assess the relationships between parents' worldviews and decisions about religious upbringing. I found these relationships to be complex and not always what I expected. Some parents return to the fold and others do not, and their narrative justifications for this have interesting implications for the literature on religion and the life cycle. While most Nones do not raise their children to have no religion, once one unpacks the substantive worldview

masked by the term “None,” there is actually a great deal of consistency between parent worldview and the choices they make for their children. But there are exceptions to this pattern, such as secular parents who choose to incorporate religion into their children’s upbringing, and self-identified religious or spiritual parents who do not. These findings challenge us to revise our definitions of what we mean by religious and secular.

## TYPES OF UNAFFILIATED WORLDVIEW

In the first part of the interview, respondents were asked about their religious background and their current religious identity. Several attempts have been made to categorize the unaffiliated into different types reflecting various levels of religiosity (Hadaway 1989; Hoge et al. 1994; Jamieson 2002; Lim et al. 2010; Pasquale 2010; Pew 2008; Roof 1999). While diverse terms are used, there seems to be some consensus that most of the unaffiliated are conventionally religious, a few are nonreligious, and the rest adhere to a variety of spiritual alternatives. One very useful conceptualization that seeks to summarize much of this diversity comes from Fuller’s widely regarded study (2001) which identifies three broad categories: unchurched believers, secular unaffiliated, and seeker spirituality. But Fuller’s work was historical in approach, he did not seek to operationalize his definitions or interview any respondents, and the bulk of his book was focused on the third category. This study takes Fuller’s model as a starting point, constructing multidimensional measures for his three

TABLE 1 Parent Identity

	Secular	Seeker Spirituality	Unchurched Believer	Indifferent
Self-identified worldview	Humanist, free thinker, skeptic, atheist	Pluralist label (e.g., Buddhist Jew)	Christian or Jewish	None
Religious or spiritual Beliefs	Neither	Spiritual but not religious	Either or both	Neither
	There is no God or other supernatural power that influences the world or human life	No to theism, yes to higher power or life force	Personal god who listens and can intervene in human affairs	No God or higher power; or do not know
Practice	None	Prayer, meditation, yoga	Prays or attends services	None



categories that were built into the coding process. During that process, it became clear that a fourth category was needed to capture some of the respondents. All four types are summarized in table 1.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to neatly assign living human beings into sociological categories. The criteria listed below were used as guidelines to code individuals as one type or another, and most respondents were placed in a category because they met the majority of its criteria. For respondents who seemed to fit more than one category, more weight was given to how they labeled themselves, and additional factors such as behavior or the presence and perceived meaning of symbolic objects in the home were also considered.

### *Secularism*

Fuller uses the term “secular” to refer to individuals who are neither spiritual nor religious. But we must also distinguish between those who embrace a substantive secular philosophy and practice and those who do not. Respondents were coded as Secularists if they self-identified with a label such as humanist, free thinker, skeptic, atheist, or other philosophy that rejects religion. In addition, they were characterized by at least two of the following: (1) identify as neither spiritual nor religious; (2) do not believe in God or other supernatural power that influences the world or human life; (3) do not engage in religious practices such as attending services, prayer or meditation, except for nonreligious reasons (e.g., attended church for the wedding of a friend, or meditating to de-stress). Instead, these individuals often engaged in self-consciously secular practices such as attending an Atheist meeting or celebrating Darwin’s birthday.

Two examples of Secularist parents are David and Bob. David, in his 40s, is a married father of three young children. An information technology specialist with a large corporation, he lives in a gated community in Jacksonville, Florida. David grew up Presbyterian, “a preacher’s kid,” but “became alienated from church teachings from a scientific perspective.” Acquiring an undergraduate degree in theoretical mathematics, he came to believe that “the whole notion of any real understanding of something beyond the concrete is doubtful.” Bob, in his early 50s, is the divorced father of two teenagers and a tenured professor at a private college in Connecticut. Bob too was raised Presbyterian but retained his faith through college, intending to become a minister. It was in seminary that he rejected religion because “the competing truth claims of the religions just negated them” and because “in the face of all the evil and suffering in the world, there’s a tsunami, 160,000 people killed, it [Christian theism] doesn’t make any sense.” Bob, like David, left his church, never to return.

Bob and David do not identify as either religious or spiritual. Yet both of these respondents care about the questions of ultimate meaning and moral discipline that have been historically raised by religion. Bob has made the study of religion his profession. Though David has not, he has spent a lot of time



seeking for “a way of truth about this existence” including extensive reading on Eastern religions and experimentation with “meditation and self-centering.” While they both reject religious or spiritual answers to questions of meaning and morality, they do identify with a philosophical worldview—Bob as atheist, David as ethical humanist—that replaces supernaturalism with materialism, faith with skepticism, and a divine moral order with the human responsibility to “rationally determine what is best for everyone.” These respondents are unaffiliated because they reject religion. Yet for them secularism is not just the absence of religion but a substantive philosophy of life.

### *Seeker Spirituality*

Fuller describes seeker spirituality as a pluralistic religious orientation that eclectically combines elements from various spiritual and religious traditions to meet the individual’s personal needs. The term “seeker” may be problematic in that not all individuals in this category are seeking, and there are Secularists and Unchurched Believers who can be said to be seeking. However, I retain the term because Fuller’s definition of this type of religious identity does seem to capture the worldviews of many unaffiliated individuals. In this study, Spiritual Seekers were those who identified with a pluralist label (e.g., Buddhist Jew) or declined a label because of pluralistic outlook (all religions are true). In addition, they were characterized by at least two of the following: they (1) identify as spiritual but not religious; (2) reject theism but believe in a higher power or life force; (3) engage in spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, or yoga.

Three parents that illustrate this orientation are Anne, Vicky, and Susan. Vicky was raised Catholic in Arkansas but left the church in her teens when the family moved to the East Coast. “I stopped going because my parents didn’t push me and because the church here is so stiff and old fashioned.” While in college, she studied Buddhism and Native American religions “which I find to be more sensible” than Christianity. “It’s all about how you live your life. . . . It’s sort of in your control, because if you do the things and you’re mindful then it comes back to you. If you’re not mindful then that comes back to you.” Now almost 30, Vicky is married and mother of a preschool age child, living in a small town near Boston where she works part time as an aerobics instructor. While she has shopped around for a church, she has found none that fits with her eclectic worldview.

Anne is an Eastern European immigrant who came to the United States as a child. Now in her early 40s, she is a married mother and artist, living in Los Angeles. She was raised Greek Orthodox but developed an interest in Buddhism when her father began experimenting with meditation practice, and she continued studying other religions in college. “I saw how similar people who were called masters or saints are, like there are masters in the Buddhist tradition and there are Christian monks . . . the Sufi masters, their divine

encounters or mystical experiences were so similar, I started thinking about it.” She concluded that there is truth in all of them.

Susan, a business consultant in her early 30s, lives with her husband and young son in Hartford, Connecticut. Born to a teenage mother, Susan was raised a conservative Jew by her grandparents but abruptly ceased religious participation when she was returned to her mother’s care at age 13. Instead she began to explore other religions, a search she continued in college and graduate school. Having gone to mosque, attended Christian seminary and participated in Wiccan rituals, Susan concluded that “all religions are valid and true.”

All three of these respondents described themselves as spiritual but not religious. They reject theism, especially the personal anthropomorphic deity generally associated with the Abrahamic religions. As Vicky put it, the idea of “this one all-knowing dude, that seems to do everything and knows everything” does not fit with her experience. “I haven’t seen anyone part the sea or make bread out of nothing or wine out of blood.” She likes Buddhism because “you have a sense of consequences for your actions rather than someone in the sky, making the rules.” Instead, many Seeker Spirituality respondents said that they believed in kind of life force or energy “a force that connects everyone and that when we would die we become a part of that, and the energy becomes reincarnated, not the person.”

Vicky pieces together her own spirituality from aspects of Buddhism, Native American tradition, and practices rooted in her Catholic childhood like lighting advent candles, with no particular commitment to any of these traditions. Susan and Anne, on the other hand, feel most at home in one tradition—Anne in Hinduism, Susan in Judaism—yet they refuse to identify as such. Anne is a devotee of a Hindu guru, and she gathers with friends for potluck and puja about once a month, but she rejects all labels. “I do not feel that any of these traditions is mine, I feel like they all are, but I don’t feel like I have to belong to one of them.” Susan says that if she had to, “I guess I would choose Judaism, but it’s hard to be Jewish, there are a lot of rules and rituals you’re supposed to keep” which, at this point in her life “I am not going to do . . . but I also really love Buddhism, it absolutely makes sense to me, it’s about human nature, and meditation practice keeps me grounded and peaceful.” Susan does not feel she should have to choose; instead, she selects elements from each tradition based on what meets her subjective needs. “I enjoy Judaism and Buddhism for very different reasons, I like the practice of Buddhism but Judaism has a tradition based on my past and my family and also has God at its center, which I do want in a religious tradition, so I don’t think I’ll choose one or the other, I’m figuring out how to make the two work for me.” These respondents exemplify the highly personal, eclectic style that Bellah et al. (1985) once called Sheilaism; they are unaffiliated not because they reject religion but because they do not want to commit to one tradition.

### *Unchurched Believers*

There is some consensus that many if not most of the unaffiliated are conventionally religious, meaning they hold religious beliefs and engage in religious practices that resemble those of mainline Christians and Jews. I coded respondents as Unchurched Believers if they leaned toward a Christian or Jewish label (many were reluctant to self-label, but would say things like “I am a follower of Jesus,” or “I am discovering my Jewish roots”). In addition, they were characterized by at least two of the following: (1) identified as religious or spiritual or both, (2) held traditional theist beliefs (a personal god who listens and can intervene in human affairs), or (3) engaged in traditional religious practices like prayer or attending services at a church or synagogue.

Two examples of Unchurched Believers are Megan and Adrienne. Megan, age 40, is a research scientist and the single mother of two teenage daughters, now living in a college town in Connecticut. Raised a devout Catholic in the mid-West, she dropped out of church at 19 when she discovered she was pregnant and “there was no one I could talk to about the situation I was in. . . . I really needed support and the church was not there.” She ended up marrying her boyfriend (and later divorcing) and spent the next decade “trying on” various religious and spiritual communities including Wicca and Anthroposophy. Although none of them really fit, she says her faith in God never wavered.

Adrienne, a 23-year-old part-time massage therapist, married with one child, lives in the same city as Megan. Raised Jewish, she went to Hebrew school every Sunday and attended temple with her parents on holidays. She and her sister were both bat mitzvahed, and even went on a trip to Israel, but then she moved away for college in New Mexico and stopped her involvement. She learned massage, dabbled in Native American healing and New Age visualization techniques. She recalls celebrating Hanukkah when her mother would visit, but “I didn’t maintain it very much on my own.” She got married, had a child, then divorced, and returned to her hometown. Then “because I live close to my mother, we started celebrating the holidays again, and . . . we have pretty much kept up.”

Unchurched Believers seem quite comfortable reclaiming the religion of their childhood, perhaps because they never fully left it. Adrienne claims that she has “always been very spiritual”; and whether affiliated or not, she has prayed every night “because I think it is so powerful.” And while Megan “never went back to the Catholic Church,” she continued to believe. “Spirituality is inherent in human nature” she says, “and criticism and doubt just comes with the territory.” The Unchurched Believers I interviewed were unaffiliated because they severed ties to particular religious institutions, not because they rejected religion. As will be discussed further below, having children can provide the incentive to reconnect those ties.

### *Indifference*

There was a fourth group of respondents whose most prominent characteristic was complete indifference to religion or spirituality. Fuller (2001) and others have categorized such individuals as secular. I argue that they merit a separate category. One reason is consistency. If we designate individuals as religious based on their identification with and/or practice of a particular worldview, then we should do the same for those who are secular. Hence “Secular” in this article refers to those parents who rejected religion or spirituality in favor of something else: atheism, humanism, agnosticism, and the like. Indifferents, by contrast, do not so much reject religion as ignore it. But their indifference also extended to secular worldviews: they do not embrace atheism or even agnosticism, and are generally unable or unwilling to articulate a worldview other than “None.” A second reason for distinguishing this category has to do with practice or the way that people actually incorporate their religion (or their secular philosophy) into their family life. Unchurched Believers, Spiritual Seekers, and Secularists may all be Nones in the sense of lacking religious affiliation, but many are clearly not Nones if you consider how they live their lives, in particular how they raise their children. As will be discussed in more detail below, Indifferent parents were the only group to *not* incorporate religion, spirituality (or even a secular philosophy that rejects religion) into the upbringing of their children, suggesting they may be the only category correctly designated as None. I coded respondents as Indifferent if they express indifference to any worldview, either religious or secular. In addition, such individuals were characterized by two of the following: (1) identified as neither religious nor spiritual, (2) did not believe in divine or supernatural forces, and (3) did not engage in any religious or spiritual practices.

Two parents who exemplify the Indifferent orientation are Jared and Peter. Peter, a business consultant, is in his 40s, married with three children and living near Boston. He was raised in a mainline Protestant church (he does not remember which denomination) which he attended sporadically with his parents; they stopped attending when he was in high school, so he left and never returned. Jared, a computer programmer, is in his 30s, married with two children, and lives near Colorado Springs. He was raised Baptist and regularly attended services and youth group until he left for college. Once there, however, he ceased to affiliate, even though a Baptist church was nearby.

Both Jared and Peter decline to identify as either religious or spiritual, and they did not claim any secular label either. When I asked Peter if he still believed in the religion of his childhood, his answer was vague. “The idea that Jesus was a spiritual being who came to earth and died, I suppose I believe that, but I do not consciously follow any Christian dogma or ethics, and we don’t go to church.” Jared’s response tended in the other direction but was similarly noncommittal: “Hm, I don’t think I believe in God or spiritual beings.” While Peter might be categorized as nominally Christian and Jared as nominally atheist, the key term here is nominal. As Jared put it, “Spiritual to me is

more of an inner thing, when someone is *interested in* and *thinking about* spiritual matters,” whereas religious means commitment to organized religion. “I am neither.” Both Jared and Peter have long been unaffiliated, yet neither has any animus against organized religion. Jared remembers the church he grew up in with fondness. He and his wife have talked about joining a church but “we’re out of town at the ski condo two to three Sundays per month, and Sundays we’re here we still don’t go.” Similarly, Peter’s disaffiliation is not rooted in any kind of resentment against church. “I don’t know why I don’t [attend church], I don’t have that in my life. It’s more like, why would I, rather than, why don’t I?” Perhaps the most telling moment came when I asked Peter, and two months later Jared, if there was some philosophy or worldview, aside from religion, that sustained him. The answer in each case was a long silence, followed by: “I really haven’t thought much about that.”

The case of Indifference exemplified by Jared and Peter points to the importance of attending to salience in defining religion and secularity. Purpora (2001) has argued that widespread indifference to “cosmic questions” generates low levels of religious salience even among churched Americans, while recent studies have explored how various forms of secularism can function as coherent worldviews in which such cosmic questions matter deeply (Pasquale 2010; Smith 2011). These studies highlight the limitations of defining religiousness in terms of belief and affiliation, while defining secularity only in terms of the absence of religion. Distinguishing between what I call the Indifferent outlook from the more substantive version of secularism described earlier is a step toward articulating a more nuanced understanding of what is secular and what is religious. The importance of that distinction is further supported when we consider the decisions parents make about religious upbringing of children.

## RELIGIOUS TRAINING OF CHILDREN

In the second part of the interview, parents were asked about the role of religion in the upbringing of their children. Parents were also observed interacting with their children, both at home and in institutional settings. Most parents reported that they began to think about how to deal with religion when their children were very young, i.e., before they reach school age. The majority of parents claimed they wanted to incorporate religion or spirituality, but not all of them did so, and when they did they followed different paths.

Previous studies point to several variables that shape children’s religious training. One is that the desire to transmit religion to children leads some unaffiliated parents to reaffiliate with institutional religion (Argue et al. 1999; Ingersoll-Dayton et al. 2002; Petts and Knoester 2007; Wilson and Sherkat 1994). Further, the transmission of religion or other worldviews to the next generation occurs not only through institutional religious education but the presence of religion in the home, and research suggests the latter is more

effective (Gunnøe and Moore 2002; Hoge et al. 2001; Smith 2005). Thus, parent decisions in this study were analyzed along three dimensions: the incorporation of religion or spirituality into their home life, the provision of religious or alternative worldview education outside the home, and the impact of this process on the parent's own affiliation. From this analysis, five distinct combinations were observed (in each case, all three coding criteria had to be met). These are summarized in table 2.

### *Nonprovision*

Several parents did not incorporate religion into their children's lives. Nonproviders were parents who (1) do not intentionally include religion or spirituality in the home life (no "God talk," religious books, meditation or prayer; holidays are cultural; religious meaning is not explained); (2) do not enroll the child in institutional religious or alternative worldview education programs; and (3) remain unaffiliated. Not surprisingly, all of the parents categorized as Indifferent were Nonproviders. But there was a Secularist, a Spiritual Seeker, and several Unchurched Believers as well.

The best examples are the two Indifferents introduced earlier. They are representative because they reflect a common theme in the narratives of Nonproviders, which is that they were too busy with other things to give much thought to how to deal with religion in the lives of their children. Jared claims to see value in religion because he "really loved Sunday school when I was a kid" and because "there are a lot of things you learn in church that are useful" such as "cultural references, singing, speaking publically . . . and exposure to different kinds of people." His commitment to actually providing such education, however, is vague: "maybe when Keith [his son] gets older . . . but I don't think that's going to happen because we spend too many weekends out of town." He admits, laughing: "And even if we were here we wouldn't go." Peter

TABLE 2 Religious Training of Children

	Nonprovision	Outsourcing	Self-provider	Alternative	Traditional
Religion in homelife	None	Extended family only	Yes	Pluralistic approach	Christian or Jewish
Religious education	None	Sunday school, CCD, or Hebrew school	None	Worldview education	Sunday school, CCD, or Hebrew school
Change in parent affiliation	No	No	No	Yes	Yes

is similarly nonchalant. He and his wife had their three children baptized “because her parents wanted it, and it seemed like the right thing to do at the time.” But when asked if he had considered sending them to Sunday school, he responded: “Fleetingly.” And what happened? “I let the thoughts pass out of my head.” Neither Jared nor Peter provides religious activity in the home. Although both families celebrate Christmas and Easter with gifts and egg hunts, they do so because “it’s fun,” it brings the family together, and “the kids love it”; there is no attempt to incorporate religious content in these events.

### ***Outsourcing***

Some parents relied on other people to incorporate religion into their children’s life. Respondents were coded as Outsourcers if they (1) do not intentionally incorporate religion or spirituality in the home, (2) enroll the child in formal program like CCD<sup>1</sup> or Hebrew school or Sunday school, and (3) decline to become themselves members of that religious institution. The Outsourcing option was selected by parents from various worldviews (except Indifferent) who gave diverse justifications for it. There was a common theme, however: their duty as a parent to provide religion, regardless of their personal ambivalence about it, because their child “had a right” to this information. Sometimes this was because religion (usually Judaism or Catholicism) was a family heritage; sometimes because it reflected an interest/inclination of their child.

For example, Susan, presented earlier to illustrate Seeker Spirituality, is enrolling her son in a Jewish preschool to give her son some “exposure to our heritage” and they attend the occasional Passover Seder with extended family. But they declined to formally affiliate with a synagogue because they did not wish to pay the membership fee, and she added: “I’m just not comfortable with the ideology there.” Megan, introduced earlier as an Unchurched Believer, says that she and her children celebrated Christmas and Easter with their Catholic grandparents, and she would “dig out the Bible” when her daughters asked about the meaning of Christmas, but she did not herself engage in any systematic effort to incorporate religion in their home. Megan says she decided to enroll her daughter in Sunday school only because her daughter wanted to go. She expressed surprise at “Jenny’s natural spirituality” which she contrasted with her own ambivalence about religion. Like parents who feel compelled to provide music lessons to a gifted child, Megan felt she should not deprive her daughter of religion. “We tried different places that people recommended, one was a Methodist church that was supposed to have a really great kids group,

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<sup>1</sup>These programs, officially titled the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine but colloquially known as CCD or catechism, provide Catholic religious education to children attending secular schools. Like Protestant Sunday school, CCD classes usually meet weekly and are often staffed by lay people.



but Jenny didn't like it all that much" so they stopped sending her there and are currently looking for a more suitable program.

### ***Self-provision***

Some parents tried to incorporate religion into their children's upbringing without institutional support. Parents were coded as Self-providers if they (1) remain unaffiliated, (2) do not enroll the child in formal religious education program, and (3) intentionally incorporate religion or spirituality into home (talk to child about God or higher power; pray or meditate with child, read religious stories; incorporates religious or spiritual explanations into holidays). The Self-provision option was also chosen by parents from various worldviews, except Indifferent.

The common thread in the narratives Self-providers used to explain their decision was one of experimentation: the challenge, on the one hand, of articulating (or even knowing) what they believe, and, on the other, of transmitting their worldview to their children in a way that has integrity and maintains the child's interest. These parents might read the Bible or Buddha storybooks to their children. They might say a blessing at meals or bedtime. Or they might engage their children in conversation about spiritual or philosophical matters such as the meaning of religious symbols or what happens when we die. Self-providers reported difficulty in sustaining their efforts, sometimes because they lacked clarity on their own worldview, and sometimes because their children lost interest in religion as they got older and/or became preoccupied with sports or other activities. Vicky's narrative dramatically illustrates these themes.

Vicky, introduced earlier as a Spiritual Seeker, celebrates Christmas and Easter as "cultural holidays" with gifts and candy egg hunts, like most Americans do. But being spiritually inclined, she wants to do more than that. So she bought a nativity set and explained to her daughter that "this is what people believe, that Jesus was born on Christmas day and Easter is when people believed he died and then came back from the dead." Vicky's use of the phrase "people believe" reflects a self-conscious effort to be honest with her daughter about what religious symbols mean to others, in contrast to what it means to her: that Christmas is a "time to give back" to the world. "It's not just about you getting a gift, it's about giving to other people and making sure they know you care about them." But providing a nonmainstream spiritual upbringing can be difficult without the supportive structure of a community. Her daughter's response to the religion lesson was lukewarm. "She's just like, okay, whatever. Now can we do an Easter egg hunt?" Vicky keeps trying, but she admits that "this is hard."

It is hard because her daughter, like many children, is more attached to the cultural trappings of the holidays (Santa and the Easter Bunny) than the religious meaning. It is also hard because Vicky has not yet fully sorted out her own feelings about religion. She admits that religion provides answers to some difficult questions. "I haven't thought of an answer for this yet, but when you

think of death and you do die, is it just the end? Is it just emptiness and that's it? Is it that you're gonna go into the ground and not die and that's a really depressing thought. So I can understand why people would want to have heaven, or hell, or purgatory to go to." Understanding others' religion, however, is not enough to make a commitment, much less educate one's child. As Vicky put it, "I can't tell her something I don't believe."

Vicky would like to join a community to educate her daughter but cannot find one she is comfortable with. She rejects the teachings of Catholicism which she experienced as sexist and guilt-ridden. She remembers her own religious upbringing caused her to "feel bad about every feeling and every thought of that I had in regards to my body." This is not what she wants for her daughter. "I want her to love herself most of all, never let someone make her think bad of herself." But she misses the ritual aspect of going to church. She likes the "energy" of the Catholic mass, so she has considered taking her daughter to a local Catholic church: "We have a really pretty Little Chapel of St. Anthony, which I have fond memories of going there with my grandparents." But her husband is opposed to the idea. Institutional options outside mainstream churches are not always readily available, especially in a small town. "They've built a Buddhist temple somewhere outside of Boston and I'd love to take her there to see and experience a ceremony," but she's unsure of the location and whether "just anyone can go there." For now, she continues to do the best she can on her own to instill her own nontheistic, spiritual values.

Providing religious education oneself requires a great deal of effort. While Outsourcers can leave matters of content and pedagogy to someone else, Self-providers must find a way to articulate their religious beliefs and determine how to transmit them. As Vicky put it, "I do a lot of thinking, self-torture." That may explain why—although Self-provision was an option chosen by some parents in all categories (except Indifferent)—this method of incorporating religion was often temporary, as parents shifted to other options for providing a religious upbringing.

### **Alternative**

Many parents who were unaffiliated before they had children reported searching for and eventually affiliating with an organization that welcomes doubters and the nonreligious such as the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) or the American Humanist Association (AHA). I should note that many scholars and members would categorize the UUA as a mainstream religious denomination; I call it Alternative only because the respondents in this study understood it as such. These were Spiritual Seekers and Secularists, i.e., parents whose worldview did not resemble conventional religion, and having children motivated them to find a community that shared their worldview. They would shop around, and find that numerous churches claim to welcome doubters only because they hope to convert them to Christianity. Parents

settled on the Unitarians because there “you really can believe whatever you want.” Several parents said they did not think of UUA as a religion but a “community of seekers,” others joined because the congregation sponsored an active chapter of the AHA. They were looking for and found what they saw as an alternative to religion.

Parent choices were coded as Alternative if the parent (1) enrolls their child in a “worldview education” program, which typically teaches kids about many different religions, rather than socializing them into one of them; (2) intentionally incorporate religion/spirituality in the home but do so in consciously pluralistic way, for example, by combining imagery from both Buddhism or Judaism, or celebrating the holidays of various religions; (3) over time, is led by having children to affiliate with a community that they perceive as tolerant of being nonreligious. The parents who chose this option were either Spiritual Seekers or Secularists (no Indifferents).

The narratives these parents used to explain their decision centered on the importance of providing their children with knowledge of religious pluralism so they can make informed choices of their own. David, an avowed atheist, and his wife Janice, a Spiritual Seeker, began looking for a community after the death of their first child. He recalls resenting the language used by his brother and the rest of his Christian family. “The words just casually rolled off, he’s in a better place . . . it was all meaningless and provided us no comfort at all.” But, recognizing the need for a supportive community—for both themselves and their remaining child—he went on the internet and found a local chapter of the Humanist Society “only ten minutes from our house.” They joined the society and enrolled their second child in Sunday school there. A few years later, they moved and switched to the Unitarian Universalist Society which provided a similar education program: one that is inclusive of many worldviews, including secular ones.

For example, “this semester, January through June, they teach holidays and traditions . . . Susan B. Anthony’s birthday, Darwin’s birthday, and other humanist kinds of things,” as well as celebrate “a Passover Seder, Chinese new year, and Mardi Gras.” Pedagogical tools typically include both a ritual enactment that children participate in and discussion about the “cultural and historical context.” The program’s inclusive approach to religion was reinforced at home. As Janice describes it, when I asked her about the Minnie Mouse on the top of their Christmas tree: “I was very anti-Angel . . . we do Hanukah at the same time, we also do the pagan Winter solstice celebration. There is a good animated story, Little Bear, about the Winter solstice celebration, and there was another ritual, an Indian light ceremony that we did. All of the major religions celebrate light at that time of the year because it’s the darkest part of the year.” Rather than being raised in one tradition, children are educated about various traditions, so that “they can make a choice for themselves when they are ready.” David and Janice are comfortable with this community and the religious education it provides in large part because it does not require

commitment to a particular religious tradition. “You don’t have to believe anything in this church”—and that’s just the way he likes it.

### **Traditional**

Some unaffiliated parents decided to return to the religion they were raised in and enroll their child in a conventional religious education program (CCD, Sunday school, or Hebrew school). Parent choices were coded as Traditional if (1) having children leads parent to return to community they were raised in and reaffiliate, (2) child is enrolled in conventional religious education program, and (3) parents incorporate religion in the home. This decision was most common among Unchurched Believers who saw parenthood as the time to go back to church or synagogue. For those who had been too busy for church, recommitment was simply a matter of reaffiliation. For those who left because of a personal crisis, recommitment often meant switching to another denomination.

The narratives these parents used to explain their decisions confirm the findings of other studies on believing parents who return to the fold: their perception that religion is a good way to teach morality and values, the desire that their children experience rituals like communion or bar mitzvah, and their search for social support and community (Alwin 1986; Ellison et al. 1996; Fay 1993; Ingersoll-Dayton et al. 2002). Mary, for example, is a married mother and homemaker with three small children. She disaffiliated from church as a teenager because “religion just didn’t seem relevant to my life.” Now in her early 30s, she is raising her kids Catholic because “it’s a good way to teach morals and values. You have to give them something. My sister is raising her kids Jewish and that’s fine too.” For Adrienne, the primary motive for returning is ritual. She remembers fondly how her family celebrated Hanukkah and Rosh Hashana, the smell of brisket wafting from the kitchen. “It’s the rituals that I enjoy,” and she wants to replicate those for her daughter. Adrienne also refers to the structural support provided by religious community: “Families need that sense of structure, that’s exactly what it is, it creates a sense of commonality between each member of the household, where people are going in ten different directions every day, and then you come together at night and it’s nice to have a nice dinner together, but it’s also nice to be tied together by something deeper, like a religion, to create a unity and household.” She appreciates having her mother nearby, and while she admits that “Judaism has become so foreign to me,” she likes the other families she has met at her mother’s synagogue and is considering reaffiliation.

The narratives illustrating the five religious upbringing options presented here were selected because they highlight common themes in parent explanations for their choices. This is not to imply a simple one-to-one correspondence between a particular narrative and particular worldviews and/or choices about children’s religious upbringing. But themes did tend to cluster, and the way they cluster expresses a logical connection to the option chosen. Many

Nonprovider parents' description of themselves as "too busy to bother with religion in their children's lives" is consistent with the parents' own Indifferent identity. For Unchurched Believers choosing conventional religious upbringing for their children, narratives were centered on religion as a source of morals and values and ritual, which is consistent with previous studies of believing parents who return to the fold. For Spiritual Seekers and Secularists choosing Alternative religious training, narratives stressed the importance of pluralism and the desire for children to have religious choices. There are currently no other studies of Spiritual Seeker parents, but [Ecklund and Lee \(2011\)](#) report a similar finding for the Secularists they studied.

## RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNAFFILIATED PARENT IDENTITY AND RELIGIOUS TRAINING OF CHILDREN

The preceding sections have described four distinct worldviews held by None parents and five different religious upbringing options. The relationship between parental worldview and the decisions they make about the religious upbringing of their children is complex, and not always what we might expect, but two general observations can be made. The first concerns how people label themselves, or identity; the second focuses on contradictions between parent identity and action, and the questions this raises about religion and secularity.

In most cases, there was a great deal of consistency between the parent's religious or secular identity and how they raised their children. The fact that most parents in this study took steps to incorporate religion into the lives of their children is surprising only if we take None to mean the absence of any religious, spiritual, or philosophical worldview. Once we discover the more substantive dimensions of unaffiliated parents' worldviews, we see that they transmit those beliefs and practices to their children much as affiliated parents do. Unchurched Believers were more likely than other unaffiliated parents to outsource religious education, or to return to the fold and provide a conventional religious upbringing. Spiritual Seekers and Secularists were more likely to select Alternative religious training. Perhaps more importantly, parents in all three of these categories took actions to incorporate religion or spirituality into their home lives. Lighting Hanukah candles, as Adrienne does, is one example of lived religion; engaging one's child in discussion about her family's understanding of Easter, as Vicky does, is another. So is putting Minnie Mouse on the Christmas tree, as David and Janice do, and talking to their children about why they do not use a star or an angel. It was only Indifferent parents who did nothing to either affirm or reject religion in their children's lives.

Paying attention to such practices challenges us to rethink what we mean by "religion." In her work on "lived religion," [McGuire \(2008\)](#) suggests that sociologists should break the habit of treating theistic beliefs, organizational affiliation, or preference for a particular tradition as the master category that

defines a person as having religion or not. Instead, she argues that we should look to how people actually put their worldviews into practice. In this sense, David's secular humanism functions much like religion because it provides a larger philosophical story to make sense of his world that he actively incorporates into how he raises his children—which stands in stark contrast to Peter and Jared's indifference to either religion or secularism. It is only Indifferents, then, who are Nones in the true sense of that word. This conclusion is further supported by the inconsistent cases, those where the parent's decision about religion seems to diverge from the parents' own worldview: self-identified secular parents who incorporate religion in their child's upbringing and self-identified spiritual or religious parents who do not.

### ***Secular Parents Who Provide Religious Education to Their Children***

The Pew Religious Landscape Survey (2008) reports that 23 percent of the secular unaffiliated seek formal religious education for their children. In this study, all of the parents I classified as secular incorporated some form of religious education into their children's lives. The difference may be partly due to self-selection among respondents to my study, but it also reflects a difference in definition. Pew's secular unaffiliated were those who claimed that "religion is not important in my life," a response as likely to be given by parents I coded as Secular and those I coded as Indifferent. It turns out that this distinction matters: in my study, none of the latter provided religious education while all of the former did. Unlike Ecklund and Lee's (2011) study, none of my Secularist parents were married to religious spouses, so relationship accommodation was not a factor. Rather, the reason why these Secularists raise their children with religion may lie in parents' interpretation of what their nonreligious status means: Secularists understood themselves as cultural outsiders while Indifferents did not.

Secularist parents contrasted their own actions, which they defined as "education about religion," from the "indoctrination" they claimed most American parents impose on their children. They described religion as a realm of knowledge their children must master in order to be successful adults; it was something their child should know about "in order to be effective in a globalized world." Therefore, religious education was essentially a tool of cultural literacy, informing their children about "what other people believe." Parents specifically mentioned knowledge of the Bible as necessary to understand aspects of American literature and history, and study of Islam as a way of understanding world events. Hence, Secularists typically chose programs that provided information about all religions, rather than preparation for commitment to one particular tradition.

A second reason for Secular parents to provide this type of religious education was the desire for community that would support their family's worldview. In the words of one Secularist I interviewed, "atheists are a rather individualistic lot" who see organized religion as "socially accepted brainwashing" and

have left church in part because “we reject such group think.” But they also recognized their outsider status in American society and the challenges this poses for raising children in accordance with their values. Secular families living in regions where religious disaffiliation is less common (Jacksonville, Colorado Springs) often felt embattled. They talked about neighbors asking them “what church do you go to?” and their children being proselytized in the public schools. So they would actively seek out what they saw as an Alternative Community and enroll their child in Sunday school there, “to give him some ammunition.” Lisa, a Secularist, joined the Unitarians because she felt like an outsider in her mostly Evangelical neighborhood in suburban Colorado Springs. She says that at the Unitarian church, there are lots of other people “like me who don’t believe in God,” so now her son gets to tell his “pushy Christian classmates” that he already belongs to a church “and the other kids will leave him alone.” There are a growing number of “worldview education” programs that cater to secular families (Manning 2010). Some parents became quite involved in that community, often teaching in the programs themselves, which in turn helped ensure continuity between institutional values and the values instilled in the home.

These parents illustrate the ambivalent and rather marginal position occupied by individuals who openly identify as Secularist. In a society where most of the population believes in God, atheists are a minority who have been shown to experience high levels of social isolation and stigma (Edgell et al. 2006; Jenks 1986; Volokh 2006), but they also demonstrate higher levels of religious knowledge than most churched Americans (Pew 2010). In doing so, they follow a common pattern of relationship between more and less powerful social groups: members of the latter are more motivated to acquire knowledge about the former than the other way around. It is an old adage that slaves knew more about the master than the master knew about the slaves, and feminist critics point out that magazines marketed to men still focus on sports, cars, and gadgets while women’s magazine articles are endlessly obsessed with figuring out male behavior. Secularists may seek religious education for their children for social and practical reasons, because it helps them negotiate their marginal status in a society where church membership is still the norm.

### ***Religious or Spiritual Parents Who Do Not Provide Religious Education to Their Children***

The opposite pattern is prevalent among Unchurched Believers and Spiritual Seekers. The Pew Religious Landscape Survey (2008) reports that among the so-called religious unaffiliated, only half provided formal religious education. This was consistent with my findings; there were numerous respondents who identified as religious or spiritual but did not seek to formally educate their children about religion or spirituality. Sometimes this means parents prefer to provide such education themselves, but just as often it means religion is largely absent from the child’s upbringing.



First, many such parents claimed that they could not find an organization that matched their personal religious orientation. Vicky, a Spiritual Seeker, feels drawn to Buddhist and Native American spirituality but is not aware of any such communities in the small town she lives in. Kathryn, an Unchurched Believer, bristles at the notion of sending her children to Sunday school. She views local denominations as “too narrow-minded. . . . I just don’t want them indoctrinated like that.” She has tried engaging the two older boys in religion, for example, by suggesting they read from the Bible before they open presents at Christmas. But “the boys just aren’t interested, so we’re not doing that anymore.” Amanda, also an Unchurched Believer, is a single mother who wants to “bring religion into my boys life” but so far has not because “the churches I went to all look down on divorce” plus “the boys thought church was boring.” Unlike Kathryn, she did not even try to provide religious education herself. “I just don’t feel qualified to do that.”

Secondly, several parents cited conflict with spouses as an obstacle to providing religious education. A number of my respondents were married to individuals with different religious preferences—for example, an Unchurched Believer married to a Secularist. While [Ecklund and Lee \(2011\)](#) found this combination may lead to at least temporary reaffiliation as the secular spouse accommodates the more religious one, it can also work the other way around. Even when neither spouse is secular, partners who have different religious commitments are more likely to be unaffiliated ([Kosmin and Keysar 2008](#)). Among my respondents, the asymmetry of partners’ religious orientation was largely ignored until they had children and one partner or extended family member raised the issue. In Kathryn’s case, her husband’s indifference to religion contributed to her becoming a Nonprovider. Heather and Patrick, both Unchurched Believers with a newborn baby, claim that “our different religious backgrounds were never an issue” until his Catholic parents began nagging that their son be baptized which has prompted her Jewish parents to vehemently object. The in-laws’ squabble has led Heather and Patrick to have extended discussions about their own religious convictions, a topic they had never addressed before and find stimulating but difficult. In an effort to compromise, they are leaning toward the Unitarians, but remain undecided.

Perhaps the most common reason that religious individuals did not provide religious training, either formal or at home, for their children was just being too busy. Providing formal religious education, unless one decides to outsource, means a parent must commit time to participating in a religious community. Self-providing the children’s religious or spiritual education means the parent must create regular times and places for such activity. In contemporary American families in which both parents work and children are involved in multiple, often competing activities adding yet another commitment like church may seem overwhelming. But without the supportive community of a church, efforts to incorporate religion into the home also fall by the wayside. Ed and Johanna, both Unchurched Believers, are typical. She is a teacher and

he runs a plumbing business; their two teenage sons are both involved in sports and music. Their home is warm and messy, the shelves adorned with multiple baseball trophies. The family displays a tree for Christmas, but the holiday is centered on gift giving and “hanging out, it’s not really a religious thing.” While Johanna claims a strong belief in God and calls herself a “deeply spiritual person,” this is not something she discusses with her children. “It just doesn’t come up.” On weekends, “I have to grade papers, and Ed sometimes gets called out on emergencies, and the boys have away games. . . . I guess we could go to church early Sunday morning, but honestly, I’m just too tired, I need one day when I can rest.” She admits that, “if I really wanted to, I could send them to church with someone else.” After all, the boys carpool to other activities. But to do that she would have to find a church she is comfortable with, a project for which she just does not have the time.

The fact that so many parents are too busy for religion brings us back to the question of salience. In our contemporary multitasking society, when both parents work and children are overscheduled with activities, it may be impossible to do everything once considered important. Most Americans say that they are spiritual or religious (Marler and Hadaway 2002) and most claim religion is good for children (Fay 1993). But in a culture where secularism still carries the stamp of outsidership, individuals may overstate their affinity toward religion. We know that social desirability bias can skew results of surveys on religion, causing people to report higher rates of church attendance or charitable giving than is actually the case. So a good test of how important religion or spirituality is to a person may be to observe how she spends her time. Religion, sports, music, and TV watching are all voluntary activities. If people find time for all but religion, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that religion may be less important to them than those activities for which they do make time.

## CONCLUSION

This article has explored how None parents make decisions about the religious upbringing of their children. The findings expand our understanding of this population in several ways. First, the article offers a conceptual framework for understanding Nones that helps us better understand both how they are similar to the religiously affiliated and how they are different. This study distinguishes four different worldviews among unaffiliated parents—Secular, Seeker Spirituality, Unchurched Believers, and Indifferent. By adding the Indifferent category, the article formally distinguishes Secularism as a substantive worldview from the mere absence of such. The Indifferent category also draws our attention to an area of overlap between Nones and those categorized as having a religion which is often overlooked. While numerous scholars (Gallup, Inc. 1978, 1988; Hout and Fisher 2002; Stark, Hamburg, and Miller 2005), have

pointed out how many Nones are actually religious believers, it is also true that many of those counted as religious are only nominally so.

Previous studies of unaffiliated parents have considered only one dimension of religion and childrearing: parents who reaffiliate with a church for the sake of their children. This study identifies five distinct ways that parents do or do not incorporate religion into their children's lives—Nonprovision, Outsourcing, Self-provision, Alternative, and Traditional. The narratives parents offer to frame these choices suggest that the unaffiliated, once we unpack the several substantive worldviews obscured by the term “None,” seek to transmit that worldview to their children, much as churching parents do. These five options for incorporating worldviews into the upbringing of a child could, theoretically, be applied to churching parents as well, and future research may examine how their use compares with that of unaffiliated parents. Of particular interest is the Outsourcing option, which, based on anecdotal observation, is not uncommon among parents who do claim a religious affiliation (e.g., so-called inactive Catholics who send their children to CCD). It would be fascinating to compare the narratives used by such so-called religious parents to those of so-called None parents to justify Outsourcing and to reflect on the implications for how we measure religion and secularity.

Second, this study provides needed empirical data on parenting among the nonreligious. It is the first to offer data on Spiritual Seeker parents, suggesting that they favor a pluralistic religious upbringing for their children. The data on Secular parents presented here differ from those in [Ecklund and Lee's \(2011\)](#) study in that affiliation with religion in order to accommodate a religious spouse was not a factor here. Instead, Secular parent actions concerning religion in their children's lives were shaped more clearly by their perceived outsider status. The data on Unchurched Believers in this study confirm the findings of previous research that some unaffiliated parents return to the fold because they desire moral teachings, ritual, and a supportive community. However, this research also sheds light on those Unchurched Believer parents who do not return and remain Nonproviders because they are too busy for religion.

Finally, this research engages the deeper question about what it means to be religious or secular. While the study does confirm the usefulness of previously established categorizations of Nones such as Unchurched Believers, Spiritual Seeker, and Secular, it illuminates the limits of categorizing individuals based on their beliefs and group membership and calls for more attention to salience of an individual's worldview, whether it be secular or religious. In doing so, this research lends support to the work of [Ammerman \(2006\)](#), [McGuire \(2008\)](#), and others who advocate measuring religiosity in terms of practice, experience, and other dimensions of “lived religion.” The measure of salience most often used in the sociological study of religion—a survey question asking respondents if religion is important to them—does not tell us anything about how people actually live their lives. Such measures are particularly

problematic when used with Nones who often reject the concept of religion but who may engage in behavior most scholars would classify as religious or spiritual. Looking at parental decision making about the upbringing of their children provides a more concrete measure of how much one's worldview matters.

The parents who claim to be religious but are too busy to incorporate religion or spirituality into their children's lives illustrate the findings of Putnam (2000), Putnam and Campbell (2010), Purpora (2001), Beithalami and Keysar (2007), and others who argue that many of those counted as religious are only nominally so. This study also confirms the findings of Smith (2011), Pasquale (2010), and others who consider secularism as a meaningful identity that is functionally equivalent to theism. Finally, this study lends support to Fuller's (2001) argument that the seemingly muddled category of Spiritual Seekers finds coherence in its embrace of religious pluralism. The parents' emphasis on maximizing choices for their children may reflect the pervasive influence of consumer culture. But it may also reflect something deeper about the meaning of Seeker Spirituality: the right to create one's own worldview. That project, the creation of one's own worldview, may be what really drives the rise in disaffiliation. Nones, by definition, reject identification with a particular institution or tradition. Yet, as we have seen, most of them—Unchurched Believers, Secularists, Spiritual Seekers alike—do hold a substantive worldview that they themselves have constructed from whatever sources they choose.

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