

Introduction

THE WORLD SEEMS more religious than ever these days.

Across the Middle East, fervent forms of Islam are growing more popular and more politically active. Muslim nations that were somewhat secularized 40 years ago—such as Lebanon and Iran—are now teeming with fundamentalism. In Turkey and Egypt, increasing numbers of women are turning to the veil as an overt manifestation of reinvigorated religious commitment. But it isn't just in the Muslim world that religion is thriving. From Brazil to El Salvador, Protestant Evangelicalism is spreading with great success, instilling a spirited, holy zeal throughout Latin America. Pentecostalism is proliferating, too—vigorously—and not only throughout Latin America, but in Africa and even China. In the Philippines, tens of thousands of people are committing themselves to new religious movements such as El Shaddai, with its powerful theology of prosperity. And many nations of the former Soviet Union, which had atheism imposed upon them for decades, have emerged from the communist era with their faith not only intact, but strong and vibrant. Even in Canada, a nation hardly known for its religious vitality, there is evidence of a spiritual and religious renaissance. To quote a leading sociologist of religion, Peter Berger, “most of the world is bubbling with religious passions.”¹

Here in the United States, religion is definitely alive and well. In fact, religion in the United States—in terms of church attendance and belief in God, Jesus, and the Bible—is stronger and more robust than in most other developed democracies. Simply driving around Southern California, where I live, it seems like every third bumper sticker is an ad for Jesus, God, or the Bible. But America's religious fervor isn't just to be found on bumper stickers. I was recently in Tucson, Arizona, and was struck by the many prominent billboards all around the city, advocating prayer and worship of the Lord. In addition to the proliferation of religious bumper stickers and billboards, Christianity in America today is being steadily broadcast from radio stations and television channels with unprecedented dynamism. As for the nation's politicians, both Republicans and Democrats seem to be more

publicly religious than ever, going out of their way to emphasize their faith. And Americans seem to like it that way. After all, nobody seemed to care when, back in 2004, George W. Bush said that his invasion of Iraq was inspired by the result of his prayerful consultations with God. If anything, that admission gained him more credibility among Americans, not less.

In sum, from Nebraska to Nepal, from Georgia to Guatemala, and from Utah to Uganda, humans all over the globe are vigorously praising various deities; regularly attending services at churches, temples, and mosques; persistently studying sacred texts; dutifully performing holy rites; energetically carrying out spiritual rituals; soberly defending the world from sin; piously fasting; and enthusiastically praying and then praying some more, singing, praising, and loving this or that savior, prophet, or god.

But this is not occurring everywhere. In fact, there actually are some notable pockets of irreligion out there.

They may be few and far between, but there are indeed some significant corners of the world today, however atypical, where worship of God and church attendance are minimal. These unusual, exceptional societies—rather than being more religious than ever—are actually *less* religious than ever. In fact, they aren't very religious at all. I am referring to two nations in particular, Denmark and Sweden, which are probably the least religious countries in the world, and possibly in the history of the world. Amidst all this vibrant global piety—atop the vast swelling sea of sacredness—Denmark and Sweden float along like small, content, durable dinghies of secular life, where most people are nonreligious and don't worship Jesus or Vishnu, don't revere sacred texts, don't pray, and don't give much credence to the essential dogmas of the world's great faiths.

In clean and green Scandinavia, few people speak of God, few people spend much time thinking about theological matters, and although their media in recent years has done an unusually large amount of reporting on religion, even this is offered as some sort of attempt to grapple with and make sense of this strange foreign phenomenon out there in the wider world that refuses to disappear, a phenomenon that takes on such dire significance for everyone—except, well, for Danes and Swedes. If there is an earthly heaven for secular folk, contemporary Denmark and Sweden may very well be it: quaint towns, inviting cities, beautiful forests, lonely beaches, healthy democracies, among the lowest violent crime rates in the world, the lowest levels of corruption in the world, excellent educational systems, innovative architecture, strong economies, well-supported arts, successful entrepreneurship, clean hospitals, delicious beer, free health

care, maverick filmmaking, egalitarian social policies, sleek design, comfortable bike paths—and not much faith in God.

I lived in Scandinavia for 14 months, from May 2005 through July 2006.² I was accompanied by my wife and two daughters, and we had a baby while there. We lived in Aarhus, Denmark's second largest city. Over the course of our stay, I observed as much of Danish society as I could, studied and read as much of Scandinavian history and culture as I could, traveled around Denmark as much as I could, and also interviewed as many people as possible, asking them about life in such a nonreligious society, as well as about their own religious belief—or rather, as was often the case—its absence. I talked to whomever I could in whatever social situations I found myself, be it waiting in line at a cafeteria or chewing on chips at a neighbor's dinner party. But in addition to countless informal conversations such as these, I conducted nearly 150 formal, structured, in-depth interviews.³ With my tape recorder in hand, along with a notepad and pen, I sat down and spoke with Danes and Swedes of all ages and various educational backgrounds, from folks who had Ph.D.s to many whose formal education never went beyond the seventh or eighth grade. The people I interviewed were from tiny rural villages, medium-sized towns, as well as large cities. And they represented a vast array of different occupations, including cooks, nurses, computer technicians, professors, artists, lawyers, slaughterhouse workers, preschool teachers, heart surgeons, farmers, police officers, journalists, high school teachers, submarine officers, psychiatrists, social workers, graphic designers, stay-at-home moms, grocery store clerks, engineers, shop stewards, small business owners, physical therapists, tax consultants, casting directors, secretaries, postal workers, students, janitors, the unemployed, and even one bass player. It was through these in-depth conversations with so many people from both Denmark and neighboring Sweden that I was able to get a deep sense of life among relatively nonreligious folks, and had the opportunity to reflect upon and analyze the nature of life in a society where belief in God is muted, minimal, and marginal. This book is thus a personal reflection and sociological analysis of what I found, experienced, and learned while living in one of the least religious societies on earth.

But it is much more than that. Along with focusing a sociological lens on the nonreligious, irreligious, or religiously indifferent men and women who make up the majority of people living in Scandinavia today—relatively secular people who are part of an important and largely understudied segment of humanity—this book also addresses additional important matters.

First of all, I argue that society without God is not only possible, but can be quite civil and pleasant. This admittedly polemical aspect of my book is aimed primarily at countering the claims of certain outspoken, conservative Christians who regularly argue that a society without God would be hell on earth: rampant with immorality, full of evil, and teeming with depravity. Well, it isn't. Denmark and Sweden are remarkably strong, safe, healthy, moral, and prosperous societies. In fact, a good case could be made that they are among the "best" countries in the world, at least according to standard sociological measures. In an age of growing religious fundamentalism and strengthening ties between religion and politics—in the United States as well in as many other countries—this is important information. It is crucial for people to know that it is actually quite possible for a society to lose its religious beliefs and still be well-functioning, successful, and fully capable of constructing and obeying sound laws and establishing and following rational systems of morality and ethics. Worship of God can wane, prayer can be given up, and the Bible can go unstudied, yet people can treat one another decently, schools and hospitals can still run smoothly, crime can remain minimal, babies and old people can receive all the care and attention they need, economies can flourish, pollution can be kept at a minimum, speeding tickets can be paid, and children can be loved in warm, secure homes—all without God being a central component of everyday life.

A second goal of this book is to consider and analyze the unique contours of the worldviews of secular men and women who live their lives without a strong religious orientation.

For example, how do they think about and cope with death? It is widely accepted that religion exists because humans need some way to deal with the impending fact of their own demise. That is, everyone is more or less afraid to die (or so the theory goes), and so people turn to religion for comfort and some sort of psychological balm in the face of death. This may certainly be the case for many people—but not everyone, and certainly not for millions of Danes and Swedes. Many Scandinavians are able to live their lives perfectly well without any great fear of, or worry about, the Grim Reaper. I interviewed so many people over the course of my stay who did not fear death—didn't even give it much thought—and were able to live their lives contentedly, being more or less comfortable with the fact that at some point in the near or distant future they will cease to exist. Along these lines, one of the most interesting individuals that I interviewed was Anne, a 43-year-old hospice nurse from Aarhus. I was completely surprised when she told

me that in her many years of experience working with the dying, she found that it was generally the *atheists* who had an easier time calmly accepting their impending fate, while the Christians often had the hardest time facing death, often being wracked with worry and anxiety. Such a finding raises serious challenges to the commonly held notion that fear of death is simply part of the human condition, and that humans subsequently “need” religion to quell this “universal” fear.

Or consider the meaning of life. Along with the fear of death, many people argue that religion exists because it provides existential answers to the great, burdening questions of why we are here and what it is all about. Sure, millions of humans may desire answers to these questions, and thus may turn to religion for answers. But not most Danes and Swedes. I interviewed many people who flatly proclaimed to me that they believe that there is ultimately *no* meaning to life. And yet these very same people continued to live moral, loving, satisfying, and prosperous lives, despite the taken-for-granted meaninglessness of it all. Again, the existence of millions of such men and women living secular lives in largely secular societies adds new dimensions—and perhaps raises significant challenges—to certain taken-for-granted theories and explanations of religion as a necessary or inevitably integral part of the human condition.

A final goal of this book is to explore and attempt to explain how and why certain societies are nonreligious in today’s otherwise extremely religious world. Whereas Denmark and Sweden are certainly at the head of the pack, several other nations, such as Great Britain and the Netherlands, are also characterized by remarkably low levels of religion. Why is it that a handful of such countries—most abundantly concentrated in Western Europe—are not all that concerned with God or Jesus or life after death? What is it about these societies that has resulted in religion being relatively insignificant and marginal? I will try to address these questions by using and expanding upon several prominent sociological theories and by drawing heavily upon my own extensive research while living in Denmark.

As for that year of living in Denmark, let me now offer some initial observations.

• • •

The first thing that I noticed upon our arrival in Scandinavia was this: no cops.

We had been in Aarhus for only a few days when I suddenly became aware of the absence of a police presence of any kind: no police cars to be

seen, no motorcycle officers, and no policemen or policewomen on foot patrol. I expressed my curiosity to my wife one sunny day as we were riding our bikes to the beach: “Where are all the police?” She shrugged her shoulders, offered a few speculative theories, and then kept on pedaling.

We rode past the university district, through downtown, past the old cathedral, through numerous intersections, past shopping centers and malls, alongside the train station, down by the waterfront, past the harbor, and straight on to the beach full of sunbathers. And at no time during that 20-minute bike ride did we see any police. Now mind you, Aarhus is not some tiny village tucked away in a remote bog somewhere out in the Nordic hinterlands. It is a thriving municipality full of industry and culture, with a population of a quarter of a million. And as I walked through the bustling downtown with my kids a few days later, meandering through the crowds, strolling along the canal, passing many busy cafes and restaurants, I noticed it yet again: no cops. It was a strange feeling. After all, back home in Claremont, California—a rather small town by American standards, with a population of about 33,000—I see police nearly every single day.⁴ But I wasn’t seeing any in Aarhus. Not even one. So I started to keep a daily tab. The result: a grand total of 31 days passed before I finally saw any police presence. And what is even more remarkable is that despite the significant lack of a police presence in Aarhus, the violent crime rate there is among the lowest in the world for a city of that size. For example, in 2004, the total number of murders in the city of Aarhus was one. Clearly, something is keeping Danes from murdering one another, and it isn’t heavy policing.

Nor is it fear of the Lord.

I mention this because many people assume that religion is what keeps people moral.⁵ For example, Dr. Laura Schlessinger—the famous radio host, television personality, and best-selling author—has declared that it is simply impossible for people to be moral without religion or God.⁶ For many people, including Dr. Laura, it is the belief in and fear of God that keeps murder rates down. But that doesn’t seem to be the case for Scandinavians. Although they may have relatively high rates of petty crime and burglary, and although these crime rates have been on the rise in recent decades,⁷ their overall rates of violent crime—such as murder, aggravated assault, and rape—are among the lowest on earth. Yet the majority of Danes and Swedes do not believe that God is “up there,” keeping diligent tabs on their behavior, slating the good for heaven and the wicked for hell. Most Danes and Swedes don’t believe that sin permeates the world, and that only Jesus, the Son of God, who died for their sins, can serve as

a remedy. In fact, most Danes and Swedes don't even believe in the very notion of "sin." Almost nobody in Denmark and Sweden believes that the Bible is divine in origin. And the rate of weekly church attendance in these Nordic nations is the lowest on earth. In addition, even though a sizeable proportion of Danes and Swedes definitely do believe in God, the God they claim to believe in is generally some vague, distant notion of their own interpretation—not the literal, punishing, vengeful, merciful, or forgiving God of the Bible. And the significance that they place on their belief in this vague, distant God is quite minimal and, well, rather underwhelming. As Danish sociologist Ole Riis notes, "It is only a minority of the Scandinavians who ascribe great importance to God in their lives. The typical attitude is lukewarm and a bit skeptical."⁸

To be sure, there are some committed fundamentalists here and there, and you can even find a well-attended Pentecostal church if you look for it. But True Believers in Denmark and Sweden are fewer and farther between than in most other countries, existing only as a miniscule minority at the fringes of society. As Denmark expert Andrew Buckser has observed, "Few avow a firm belief in a well-defined God, and most look to science rather than religion to make sense of their world."⁹ According to Swedish scholar Eva Hamberg, less than 20 percent of Swedes claim to believe in the existence of a personal God, and "for many of those Swedes who still believe in God, this belief is more or less unimportant."¹⁰

So the typical Dane or Swede doesn't believe all that much in God.¹¹ And simultaneously, they don't commit much murder. But aren't they a dour, depressed lot, all the same? Some Americans might suspect that Scandinavians' marked detachment from the Lord would breed widespread despair. As they forgo prayer, let their Bibles gather dust, fail to praise Jesus on a regular basis, and remain more or less indifferent to the Lord Almighty, don't these religiously tone-deaf Nordics find themselves feeling empty deep down in their souls? Aren't they unhappy? Not according to Dr. Ruut Veenhoven of Erasmus University. Dr. Veenhoven is a leading authority on worldwide levels of happiness from country to country. He recently ranked 91 nations on an international happiness scale, basing his research on cumulative scores from numerous worldwide surveys. According to his calculations, the country that leads the globe—ranking number one in terms of its residents' overall level of happiness—is little, peaceful, and relatively godless Denmark.¹²

As an American living there, I found the low levels of religiosity in Scandinavia fascinating, and even, I'll admit, a relief at times. For a

nonbeliever/agnostic such as myself, life in the strongly religious United States can be somewhat exasperating. Although I can definitely recognize and appreciate the enormous good that religion can generate in terms of providing community, instilling hope, strengthening family bonds, emphasizing love and forgiveness, and embellishing life with important rituals and rites of passage, it still isn't always so easy for me to live in a country as religious as the United States, where praying is as ubiquitous as dieting, where police chiefs of major cities can explain a rise in crime within their jurisdiction as being caused by Satan,¹³ where governors can entreat the public to use prayer as a primary method with which to confront natural disasters,¹⁴ and where school board members consistently challenge the teaching of human evolution in high school biology classes. In all honesty, for me personally, living in Denmark was like a year-long breath of secular fresh air.

Of course, I must acknowledge that religion hasn't disappeared from Danish or Swedish culture altogether. One of the reasons I have titled this book *Society without God* as opposed to *Society without Religion* is because many elements of the Lutheran religion definitely continue to permeate Danish and Swedish culture. For example, the majority of Danes and Swedes are still tax-paying members of their respective national churches, most Danes and Swedes prefer to get married in church, and a large majority of Danes and Swedes still choose to baptize their children under the auspices of a pastor (who, by the way, is usually a woman these days). Additionally, most Danes will see their sons and daughters go on to be confirmed in the church in early adolescence. But even these overt vestiges of Lutheran religiosity are seldom performed out of a sense of faith or spiritual conviction. Rather, Danes and Swedes overwhelmingly engage in these Christian rituals out of a sense of cultural tradition. For example, nearly all of the people that I talked to said they paid about 1 percent of their annual income in taxes to support their national church simply because "that's just what one does." It almost never had anything to do with God, Jesus, religious conviction, or faith. And nearly everyone I interviewed who got married in church did so solely for the "tradition" or "romance" of it, preferring the aesthetics of a church ceremony over a bland ceremony in city hall. One of my closest friends while living in Denmark was Mikkel, a 39-year-old pastor¹⁵ within the national Danish Lutheran Church. He has been the leader of a small congregation in a quiet village about 15 miles outside of Aarhus for several years. He has performed over 200 weddings. He always meets with the couples and talks with them

before marrying them. He asks them why they want to get married in the church as opposed to city hall. He summarized the responses:

You would expect that quite a lot of them would say, well, "That's to have the blessing of God." Now I think that out of these 200, it would be like 10 who have mentioned God. Maybe 2 or 3 of them would say it's to have the blessing of God. But like 10—which is about 5 percent—would mention God. The rest of them would look at me like, "Why do you ask this question? Obviously it's because of tradition, Mikkel"—they think that it's a joke that I even ask. "This is tradition. It has to be a real wedding, you know, with the white dress in this old church."

As for the widespread practice of baptizing babies, this is also generally done for the sake of tradition rather than for the sake of the babies' souls. Most people I interviewed said that they had their children baptized to please Granny, not God. For an example of a thoroughly secular Scandinavian who would still baptize her child despite her lack of belief in God, consider Lise, a 24-year-old Dane who works as a computer technician in Aarhus. Lise is from a small town in central Jutland, and was raised by parents who did not believe in God and did not go to church. None of Lise's friends growing up believed in God—indeed, God was simply something that was never talked about in her social world. Like her family and friends, Lise does not believe in God, nor does she believe in Jesus, nor in the devil or heaven or hell—although like many Danes, she has no problem off-handedly admitting that "there is more between heaven and earth." Lise is currently engaged, and I wondered, if she were to have kids, would she raise them to be religious?

No.

Will you have them confirmed?

Yeah, and baptized.

Because. . . ?

It's the norm. It's what we do.

And that was that. When I pushed her on why she would baptize her baby even though she doesn't believe in the central tenets of Christianity, she just shrugged her shoulders and again explained that it is simply what Danes do. Another Danish woman that I interviewed was Gitte, who is 40 years old and works as a preschool teacher in Aarhus. Gitte is a third-generation nonbeliever, that is, her grandparents as well as her parents did not believe in God. And she doesn't either. And yet she had her two children baptized. I asked her how she could sit in a church and listen to a pastor say all those religious words about God and Jesus while performing

the sacred ritual of baptism over her children if she didn't even believe in Jesus or God or anything like that. She said that the words had no meaning for her at all, but that the ritual itself was a nice experience, and that she ultimately understood the entire ceremony as "just a piece of cultural performing."

As for confirmation—again, most people I talked to said they went through the process simply because that is just "what everybody does," and the party, gifts, and money that come along with it are something most 14-year-olds have a difficult time refusing. Thus, even though most Scandinavians engage in a variety of nominally religious rituals and Christian life-cycle ceremonies, they rarely do so for theological reasons. From baptism to paying church taxes, from confirmation to church weddings, the popular Lutheran components of most Scandinavians' lives are best understood as simply secular traditions with religious trappings.

Most Danes and Swedes are characterized by a strong belief in reason and rationality. In fact, 82 percent of Danes accept the evidence for Darwin's theory of human evolution, among the highest proportion of evolution-believers in the Western world.¹⁶ And yet, most Danes and Swedes do simultaneously identify themselves as Christian. How is that possible? How can one reject the holiness of the Bible, not believe in Jesus, not believe in sin, salvation, or resurrection—not even believe in God—but still call oneself Christian? I pursued that very question repeatedly throughout my year of research. For the vast majority of Danes and Swedes that I spoke with, when they said they were Christian, they simply meant it in terms of cultural heritage and history, and when I asked them what the designation "Christian" meant to them, they almost invariably all stressed the same things: being kind to others, taking care of the poor and sick, and being a good and moral person. They almost never mentioned God, Jesus, or the Bible in their explanation of Christian identity. When I specifically asked these Nordic Christians if they believed that Jesus was the Son of God or the Messiah, they nearly always said no—usually without hesitation. Did they believe that Jesus was born of a virgin or that he rose from the grave? Such queries were usually met with genuine laughter—as though the mere asking was rather silly.

Take the example of Anders, who is from Aarhus, is in his mid-forties, and owns a small corner market. Anders does not necessarily know if he believes in God or not, he doesn't believe in the divinity of Jesus, he doesn't believe in heaven or hell, and is sure that the Bible is merely a work of human creation. But he still considers himself a Christian. As he explains:

I'm believing in good things in human beings, which are the real things of Christianity. You can't kill other people. You have to help old people, and so on and so on. I think those are some good rules to live by. That's why I am a Christian man.

Consider Elsa, a 56-year-old Swedish human resources consultant from southern Sweden. No belief in God, Jesus, heaven, or hell, or the Bible, yet she calls herself a Christian. I asked her what that meant, and she replied:

To be a decent human being and respect other people and, yeah, to be a good person.

Not your typical American understanding of being Christian, that's for sure. While one can certainly find such sentiments among liberal, main-line American Christians,¹⁷ Anders and Elsa offered fairly straightforward articulations of what could most easily be characterized as secular humanism.

The differences between Scandinavia and the United States—at least when it comes to religion—are thus quite remarkable and rather numerous. I spent my sojourn in Denmark in a relative state of awe, constantly noting how different things were in Aarhus when compared to, say, Anaheim. Whereas in the United States one cannot flip through radio stations or television channels without coming across preachers weighing in against sin and the need for salvation, and a football or basketball game can seldom begin without a prayer to Jesus, and 75 percent of Americans claim to believe in the existence of hell,¹⁸ in Denmark and Sweden, people are far more interested in their families, their homes, their bikes, local politics, their careers, the weather, and even their favorite British or Brazilian soccer players than anything remotely theological. And as for belief in hell—only 10 percent of Danes and Swedes believe in the existence of such a place—the lowest national rates of belief in hell in the world.¹⁹ While lovely, old churches dot the landscape of Denmark and Sweden, and while children are taught about Christianity as part of the elementary school curriculum, religion is distinctly muted in Scandinavia in a way that most Americans would find hard to fathom. Let me offer two examples to further illustrate this point: politics and the playground.

First, politics and religion, a topic I broached earlier on. In the United States, it is generally the rule that if a politician wants to be successful, he or she must not only be a regular churchgoer and a “person of faith,” but must express that publicly and frequently. Most Americans these days prefer that their governors, senators, and presidents believe in God, praise God, and even base their decisions on prayer and consultation with God.

Consequently, an atheist in America has about as much chance of being elected president as a member of Al-Queda. But it's just the opposite in Denmark and Sweden. In these countries, politicians are expected to keep whatever religious beliefs they may have to themselves, and if they have no religious beliefs, well, that's even better. If a politician were to discuss his or her faith publicly, or were to base any decision-making on prayer, or were even to refer to God now and then in public addresses, that individual would quickly be out of a job. Or rather, would never even have gotten the job to begin with.

Consider the results from a recent international survey that asked people from different countries if they agreed or disagreed with the following proposition: "Politicians who don't believe in God are unfit for public office." Sixty-four percent of Americans agreed, but only 8 percent of Danes and 15 percent of Swedes did so.²⁰ A second question in the same survey asked people how they felt about the following statement: "It would be better for our country if more people with strong religious beliefs held public office." A full 75 percent of Americans agreed with that proposition, but only 12 percent of Danes and 30 percent of Swedes agreed, placing Denmark in the number one slot worldwide among countries whose citizens do not want religious people holding public office. In the words of Anders Fogh Rasmussen, Denmark's current prime minister: "Religion is and has to be a personal matter . . . it is dangerous when personal beliefs are over-ruled by religious laws, where an individual's beliefs must comply with 1,000-year-old commandments and scriptures, and where society has to conform to religious commands. In Denmark, we differentiate between religion and politics."²¹

For a second example of just how different the United States and Scandinavia are when it comes to religion and its place in society, let's consider the playground. In most elementary schools across America, if a child admits to not believing in God or Jesus, that child can expect a certain degree of trouble. It is quite possible that he or she will be shunned at school, or worse. When my own daughter was six years old, she was swinging on one of the swings on the school playground during recess. When her friend asked her if she believed in God, my daughter replied "no." Her friend immediately stopped swinging, damned my daughter to hell, and walked away—never to swing with her again.

And yet, in Scandinavia it is virtually just the opposite situation: to publicly profess a belief in God or Jesus marks you the strange one, the deviant one, the oddball. As Sarah, a 20-year-old grocery clerk from a tiny village in Jutland, explained to me:

Young people think that religion is kind of taboo. As a young person, you don't say, "I'm a Christian and I'm proud of it." If you do that, you often get picked on.

It is thus the rare believing Christian child on the Scandinavian playground who may face shunning, ridicule, or worse. Torben was just such a child. Beginning in the fifth grade, when his strong belief in God and Jesus became known, ridicule and harassment became routine. He changed schools a number of times, and finally found refuge in a private Christian school. "I still have scars," he lamented tearfully during the course of our interview. He is now 25 years old, married, and pursuing a degree in theology. He told me that he quit the national Danish Lutheran Church a few years ago because of its tolerant attitudes toward homosexuality. He now worships at a "free" church. He believes that the Bible is the literal word of God, that Adam and Eve actually existed, that Jesus died for our sins, that the devil is real, and that all non-Christians will go to hell. I asked him if he thought that all Jews would go to hell.

That's what I believe. I don't like it, but that's what my Bible tells me.

And all Buddhists and Hindus?

Yes.

Whereas many Americans would consider Torben of sound mind, most Scandinavians would find his religious beliefs disquieting, bizarre, and possibly the result of mental instability. That is, whereas Torben's religious beliefs are fairly common in the United States, in Scandinavia, he is an extreme rarity. I asked Andreas, a 33-year-old public high school teacher in the city of Odense, how many of his students share the beliefs of Torben. "Two or five percent," he replied.

One could go on and on detailing the many differences between the overt religiosity of the United States and the widespread secularism of Denmark and Sweden. For unlike in the United States, in Scandinavia there is no national anti-gay rights movement, there are no mega churches with "ATMs for Jesus" installed on-site where people can donate money to the church using a credit card, there are no popular, successful preachers haranguing "sodomites" or sinners on the radio airwaves, there are no political candidates who say that they decided to run for public office because "God told them to," there are no "Jesus fish" imprinted on advertisements in the yellow pages, there are no school boards or school administrators who publicly doubt the evidence for human evolution (and seek to limit its teaching), there are no judges who make rulings based on what the Bible says, there are no religiously inspired "abstinence only" sex

education curricula, there is no viable anti-abortion movement, there are no parental groups lobbying schools and city councils to remove Harry Potter books from school and public libraries, there are no “natural history museums” that erect installations depicting Adam and Eve,²² there are no restaurants that include Bible verses on their menus and placemats, there are no “Faith Nights” at national sporting events, where popular athletes praise God and preach Christianity to stadiums full of sports fans—all of which can be found within America’s thriving religious landscape.

What is life like in such countries, so unlike the United States, where religious faith is almost invisible and God is relegated to the deeply private margins of society? And what about the individual men and women who live in Denmark and Sweden today? What is their (nonreligious) outlook on life? Of course, there are always nonbelievers in every society, even the most fundamentalist. And yet only in Scandinavia is nonbelief considered normal, regular, mainstream, common. Thus, to be a nonbeliever is one thing, but to be a nonbeliever in a society that thinks nothing of nonbelief and considers it typical and normative—that is something sociologically significant.

Lars was one such individual.

It is hard to say whether or not Lars is a “typical” Scandinavian. But he surely comes close. I’d like to end this introduction with a brief portrait of him, because of all the people I met and interviewed over the course of my year in Denmark, Lars made one of the more positive impressions on me. It was an impression of contentment and sanity, as well as a strong love of life. I was happy to have met Lars, and happy to have been able to sit with him for about an hour and a half on a snowy, cold, dark night in the middle of February, in a cozy house by the Kattegat sea, and ask him about his life and his beliefs.

Lars is 77 years old. He is in great shape and his face flushed with energy as we talked. He was raised in Copenhagen, but currently lives on the island of Fyn. He is retired now, but he spent many years as the headmaster of a small high school. Politically, he is right of center. He has two daughters and has been married to the same woman for over 50 years. His father was a strongly devout Christian, and was one of the leaders of his congregation. Lars’s mother, however, was an atheist, as was her father, and Lars recalled that her father was deemed ineligible for promotions as a result of his atheism, which—back in the 1800s—was considered quite a problem when made public.

As Lars explained, his mother and father did not get along:

My father was the head of the biggest—a big group of Christians. . . . He was not the priest, but he was a teacher. He was head of it . . . the congregation. And my mother was an atheist. And they divorced when I was four years old.

Lars and his two brothers were thus raised mostly by their mother, although they did see their father from time to time, and even went with him to his congregation on occasion. Lars considers himself an atheist, and says that he always was an atheist—and he pointed out that he even refused to go through the confirmation process, which was quite an unusual move 65 years ago. However, he was married in the church. I asked him why, and he replied with a laugh:

That's because the mother-in-law has great power, you see.

Lars's mother passed away in 2003, and I was curious about the durability of her atheism as she aged. In her last days, did she ever turn to God?

No . . . she had three months left; then she would have been 108 years.

She lived that long?

You can look on her tombstone—it's in our town—1895 to 2003.

She just passed away . . .

Yes.

But she always stayed an atheist?

Always.

We talked a bit more about her death—how she was cremated without a Christian funeral, as was her wish. I looked at Lars—who is coming up on 80—and asked him about his own impending death.

What do you think happens after we die?

Oh . . . my old teacher in biology always said the chemicals you are made of have a value of about 4 Danish crowns and you have to pay back as soon as possible, so it goes down right to the crematorium. And I think the same . . . But . . . no, no.

You don't believe in life after . . . ?

No . . . I don't know, I don't know. I know—for me—when it's finished, it's finished.

But if you think “when it's finished, it's finished,” then what is the point of it all? What is the meaning of life?

The meaning of life? I have my time on the earth and it's my duty to do it as well as it's possible for me. I try to be a good father . . . I have wonderful years.

How do you cope in your life when things are bad or you have something sad in your life? What do you do?

What should I say? . . . I have no sad moments. You know what I mean. I've been a very happy man. Everything I want, every job I ask for—I got my wife, two highly educated daughters, four grandchildren with brains running.

So you're happy?

Yes. Of course, I've had moments when I was . . . unsatisfied and angry and then that's your own fault, I think. Yes, but I have never been in a situation where I felt that I needed something to support me.

We talked of many more things: his recollections of the German occupation of Denmark during World War II, the recent influx of Muslim immigrants into Denmark, the night he was honored at a dinner at the high school where he used to be headmaster, and how 500 people stood up and toasted him, which he described as “the golden moment” of his life. But what most struck me about Lars throughout the course of the interview was his general warmth and what seemed to me to be an honest and totally unfeigned happiness and satisfaction with life. He seemed to have had it all: a strong, long marriage, loving daughters and granddaughters, a satisfying career, a lovely home on Denmark's greenest island, good health—and all without belief in God.

It is my deep desire to recognize and understand people like Lars—and to fathom and describe the culture that produces so many individuals like him—which comprises the underlying motivation of this book.

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, we currently live in a world bubbling with religious passions. But that makes the recognition of people like Lars—people who are not caught up in this bubbling passion—all the more provocative and interesting. And it renders an analysis of relatively “godless societies” such as Denmark and Sweden all the more pressing.