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Professor Van Tongeren is one of the most important living psychologists studying religion and beliefs. His work details, with humility and sensitivity, why people abandon or change their religious beliefs, and he supportively offers suggestions about what residue might remain, and how people might rebuild community and meaning. This book is filled with research-based understanding and recommendations, and kindness.

**–ADAM B. COHEN, PhD,** PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY, ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY, TEMPE, AZ, UNITED STATES

An enlightening and compassionate resource, this timely book offers practical advice and profound insights for individuals reconstructing their religious beliefs or community. A blend of well-researched science and personal guidance for anyone on a journey of spiritual exploration and discovery.

**–CRYSTAL L. PARK, PhD,** PROFESSOR, PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT, STORRS, CT, UNITED STATES

People's religious beliefs are central to their lives, yet in recent years so many people have been walking away from their faith. In this carefully researched yet deeply personal book, Van Tongeren explains why people typically leave their religions, and explores the diverse kinds of psychological reactions that people commonly experience after they leave. He offers an accessible and fascinating road map for what people can expect after they have left their religion behind them.

**–STEVEN J. HEINE, PhD,** PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA, VANCOUVER, BC, CANADA

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This book is a highly engaging and informative look at religious trauma, deconstruction, and creating the post-religious life. The crucial distinction Dr. Van Tongeren makes between religious "Nones" and religious "Dones" captures something so important, it should inform all subsequent research on this population. Both mental health professionals and people who have left high-control religions will find clear, research-based maps to the challenging and creative process of deconstruction in this important and helpful work.

**–COCO OWEN, PhD,** PSYCHOLOGIST IN PRIVATE PRACTICE, SPECIALIZING IN RELIGIOUS TRAUMA AND RECOVERY

I'm excited about this book, which I see as a go-to resource for anyone who has left religion or is struggling around such a decision. Packed with helpful psychological insights, relevant research findings, and practical suggestions, this book will also be useful for friends, family members, and therapists of those who pull away from religion.

**–JULIE J. EXLINE, PhD,** PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCES, CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY, CLEVELAND, OH, UNITED STATES

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INTRODUCTION

# THE GREAT DISILLUSIONMENT

In 1927, Sigmund Freud published a critical analysis of religion, titled *The Future of an Illusion*. He viewed religion as a fictional illusion, born, in part, out of unconscious wish fulfillment. Although he acknowledged that religion had positive features, such as providing people with a moral framework and offering them a sense of meaning and purpose, he argued that it also had been used to oppress minoritized groups and keep certain folks in power. Instead, he called for people to move from religion to rationality, replacing these ancient beliefs with a secular set of sensibilities.

Now, roughly a century later, his book reads prophetic. The United States is experiencing the *Great Disillusionment*. People are leaving religion in the United States in staggering numbers. Although other parts of the Western world, such as Europe, have been becoming increasingly secularized for some time, and other regions in the world are still deeply religious (with Islam as the fastest growing religion worldwide outside the United States; Pew Research Center, 2015a), Americans are more recently walking away from their faith. We're living through a considerable change in the religious and cultural landscape.

Consider this: According to the Pew Research Center, over the past 30 years, the percentage of U.S. adults identifying as Christian

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has dropped from roughly 90% to 63% (Pew Research Center, 2022). The center is projecting that Christianity will no longer be the majority religion in the United States by 2070. By then, the number of religiously unaffiliated individuals would be roughly the same as Christians (if not slightly higher). On the whole, religious affiliation is on the decline, and across religions, younger generations are increasingly less likely to endorse religious beliefs and activities on numerous dimensions, including belief in God, heaven, hell, daily prayer, weekly religious service attendance, and the importance of religion in their lives (Pew Research Center, 2015b). This "rise of the nones" (i.e., people whose religious identity would be "none") includes a rise of people we call the "dones"—those who were once religious but no longer identify as such (Van Tongeren, DeWall, Chen, et al., 2021). Indeed, the overwhelming majority of nones (78%) were raised religious before walking away from their faith (Pew Research Center, 2016). In the United States, young adults raised Christian are decreasingly likely to convert to or remain Christian and increasingly likely to leave. Notably, Pew highlights that nearly one in three individuals raised Christian leave their faith by the time they reach age 30.

> ***Religious nones:*** *People whose religious identity would be "none."*
>
> ***Religious dones:*** *People who were once religious but no longer identify as such.*

I call this departure from religion the Great Disillusionment. Whereas the Great Awakening was a period of religious reignition and reengagement, what we're observing now is an exodus—still of the religious kind, but in a very different way. People are leaving churches, turning away from organized religion, and seeking alternative ways to engage with the transcendent. Some have estimated

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that nearly one in four Americans have switched religion (Public Religion Research Institute, 2023), and my own cross-cultural work suggests that the number of people leaving religion may be around one in five individuals (Van Tongeren, DeWall, Chen, et al., 2021). But with this disillusionment may come grief, loss, pain, and longing.

## THE PANGS OF LOST FAITH

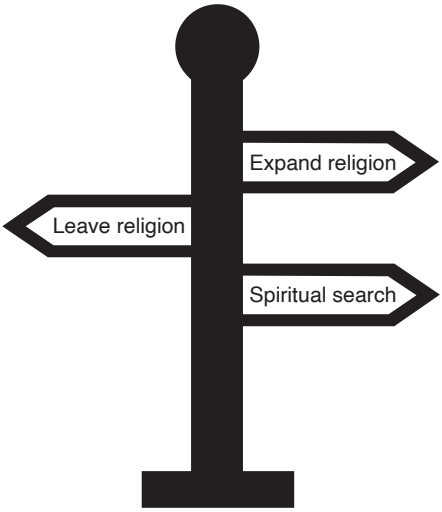
The shift has not come without costs: Many people are missing, if not longing for, experiences that only religion has uniquely provided. Many are looking for rituals, symbols, belonging, broader narratives of meaning, and an engagement with the mystical—features of human life that religion readily provided. As we'll come to see later in this book, we're naturally built to think and behave religiously, and as many collectively move away from traditional religious structures, the pangs of lost faith are real and pressing, and many are left searching for ways to address deep questions and seeking for lasting meaning. In turn, many have turned to alternative structures or practices as substitutes for divine relations.

As people depart from their religion, they often seek one of a few different paths. Some people are walking toward atheism, agnosticism, or unbelief. They've decided that their supernatural beliefs are misplaced, and they are squarely secular. Others may have expanded their religious beliefs, widened their perspective, or embraced doubt. They have grown and expanded, or perhaps experienced spiritual maturation. Still others are not satisfied with letting their spirituality languish. They are seeking out new ways to connect with the transcendent or experience deep existential meaning in ways that feel authentic. They haven't given up on their spirituality, just a religious identity that no longer fits. But one thing is clear: Many are also feeling a burgeoning sense of spiritual and existential dis-ease: They're anxious and

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**Possible Paths From Disillusionment**




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unsettled, and some are seeking to satisfy the ancient longings religion once did.

Although no one can predict how long this Great Disillusionment will last—and what the final disposition of such a large-scale exodus from religious faith might be—it is clear that a substantial portion of Americans are experiencing religious change by leaving religion. Because we're in the middle of this shifting religious landscape, there are certainly more questions than answers about what the future might look like. But social scientists have shed some light on why people are leaving, where they are going, and how they might find meaning amid a changing religious identity.

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This book is designed to help people who are either leaving or modifying their religion. In psychological terms, these two kinds of religious change are known as *religious deidentification* and *religious reconstruction*. Folks who leave religion undergo religious deidentification, and those who radically reshape their beliefs undergo religious reconstruction. And both start with a significant process called *religious deconstruction*, which is the usually lengthy (and often difficult) process through which people break down, analyze, question, and struggle with their religious worldview. As we'll see, the beginnings may look similar, but the destinations are quite different.

> ***Religious deconstruction:*** *the process of breaking down, analyzing, questioning, and struggling with one's religious worldview.*
>
> ***Religious deidentification:*** *the process of leaving one's religion altogether—toward atheism, agnosticism, or something else entirely that does carry a religious identity.*
>
> ***Religious reconstruction:*** *the process of rebuilding one's religious worldview into something that somewhat resembles one's original faith but diverges in important ways.*

Thus, this book will help not only those who have already left religion or are in the process of walking away, but also those who are still in the process of questioning their religious faith or tradition or actively working to rebuild it. Similarly, if you know or love someone who is undergoing religious change or want to know more about the process of leaving religion, this book explores the social and psychological processes involved.

In this book, I draw from the most relevant psychological theories and empirical scientific data. I discuss what we know and don't know about religious change, and I offer clear applications to help

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you build a life of meaning and flourishing. And I'll help those who still want to keep some parts of their spiritual life even though they are done with religion. By understanding other people who have left their religion, we can gain a better understanding of some of the deeper needs we humans share and how we address core questions about being human, understand how religion helped address these needs and questions, and look ahead to alternative ways of finding peace, engaging with the transcendent, and experiencing meaning.

## YOU ARE NOT ALONE

In autumn 2019, I attended a gathering of people whose religious faith was changing. People from across the United States came together in community, unified by a singular commonality: Their old ways of being religious simply weren't working. My wife found this conference and recommended that we attend. In many ways, we were both experiencing rather significant shifts in our own religious and spiritual identities, and she thought this meeting would be interesting and potentially helpful. An old friend of mine from high school was driving to this event with his family from Kansas City, which just sweetened the experience.

I wasn't quite sure what to expect, and when we arrived, I was shocked at the popularity. Several thousand people were in attendance, many of whom shared the same story: They were raised as evangelical Christians and for myriad reasons no longer identified as such. Some in the crowd were still very interested in maintaining a spiritual life or connection to something greater. Others were wrestling with doubt and questions and weren't sure where they would land. Many, if not most, were angry and felt hurt by aspects of their religious upbringings. And some were completely finished with religion or anything to do with spirituality. I started brainstorming how better to understand this group more carefully and completely.

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As I stood in the arena peering over the thousands of conference-goers, a singular thought overwhelmed me: *I am not alone*.

Religious change can be a lonely experience. In predominantly religious cultures, walking away from religion can feel both terrifying and liberating, but it likely feels isolating. The reassuring news is that you are not alone. If you are in the process of rethinking your religious beliefs, have experienced religious loss or struggle, or have undergone a significant religious change, it's actually somewhat common—perhaps more common than you think. There are communities of people who have experienced similar things as you have. Of course, each of our journeys is unique and no one knows precisely what we've gone through, but a surprising number of people have decided to leave religion. And all of our very best estimates suggest that number is going to continue to increase.

I'll eventually unpack my own religious journey, but let me start with some comforting statistics. As a social psychologist, I've been studying the psychology of religion since my junior year project in college. But a conversation on a late autumn afternoon in 2017 changed the trajectory of my research in this area. My good friend Peter and I were sharing a 10-mile run to celebrate me turning in my materials for tenure and promotion. He asked, what was one thing I had been too afraid to study but would now like to pursue if granted the security of tenure. Without hesitation, I said "the process of leaving religion." With more nudging, I shared that it felt like a charged topic, an area ripe for discord. And, as someone who grew up deeply religious, it felt a bit unsettling to tackle. How could I breach this seemingly profane topic that felt like an affront to the way I was raised? Thanks to his encouragement, I decided to tack course, and since then, I've been deeply invested in studying religious change—how and why people change or leave religion.

A few months later, I wrote a grant proposal to study why people are leaving religion, and those funds supported a series of projects

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that help frame the research I discuss in this book. But one of our first discoveries was that one in five people report having left religion. That is, around 20% said that they formerly identified as religious but no longer do. So many researchers had been focusing on the "nones" that they largely ignored the *religious dones*—a group named as such because they are done with religion.

One in five.

I found this number rather surprising. When we were applying for the grant, my colleague and I had to make a case that there would actually be enough people leaving religion to make our efforts worthwhile. Our previous estimates used in our proposal, even at the most generous, would have put this number around 8% to 10%. When we saw the results come back at twice as high, we immediately knew that we were in an understudied but highly needed area of research. Since then, we've rather consistently seen in our U.S. samples that roughly a fifth of the respondents are religious dones.

If you are done with religion, this means that you're not alone. There are more people like you than you're probably aware. If you're not a religious done but your religious views are changing, you can take comfort in knowing that plenty of other people have gone through religious change, even if it looks different from yours.

These data fit into a larger sociological narrative that is unfolding in the United States and around the world: The number of people identifying as nonreligious is increasing (Pew-Templeton, 2015). More than 1.1 billion people in the world do not identify as religious, and that number is expected to grow by another 100 million. The upshot to this is that there is a community of people who do not identify as religious—and likely an even larger community of people who have undergone some kind of religious change. If this describes your experience, this book is for you.

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## THE BIG IDEA

This book is centered around one big idea: How can people who are no longer served by traditional religion craft a flourishing and meaningful life?

We'll tackle this big question in several ways. First, drawing from psychological science, I'll provide practical support and useful tips for people who are leaving religion. People are leaving church, or at least religion, in record numbers. In the United States, religious affiliation on the whole is declining, and we're especially seeing this among Christians—perhaps because Christianity has been the dominant religion, and perhaps because there are some sociocultural features that precipitated its decline. And among those who stay, many people's religious and spiritual beliefs are evolving in significant ways. For many of these individuals, a religious faith that once provided comfort, guidance, and an interpretative lens through which they can see the world no longer fits or feels authentic with their current beliefs and values. Many people are undergoing profound religious deconstruction. What predicts who experiences this religious evolution? How do people navigate this process? And what might suggest who retains their faith and who walks away? The psychological science I'll discuss integrates much of my own research on religious dones and research conducted by other leading scholars to provide a practical guide for people who are undergoing religious deconstruction or change.

Second, we'll look at the various expressions of religious deconstruction and deidentification and how this may play out in people's lives. The data on religious identity reveal that religious nones—or the religiously unaffiliated—are the third largest affiliative group in the world (Pew-Templeton, 2015). In a religion-saturated culture, and one that has primarily conflated religion and spirituality, it can be challenging to navigate the nuances of "leaving religion."

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Religious nones are a diverse group, including religious dones: those who were once religious but no longer identify as religious. Even among religious dones, the motivation for leaving religion varies, and their own personal beliefs and behaviors are unique. For some, this may mean abandoning one's beliefs; for others, it means leaving an institution that no longer fits them; and for others, it means letting go of a suddenly unhelpful or constricting label.

Finally, I hope to help individuals find new pathways to meaning and flourishing in the midst of, and following, this process. As this group is growing in size, research has only recently begun to accumulate. Because research in this area is relatively new, there hasn't been much work on establishing new pathways for flourishing or finding existential meaning. Religion leaves well-worn paths, and sometimes, effort is needed to find a new way. We'll also discuss how to address challenging social relationships with people who may not support, or understand, your process of religious deconstruction. This process can feel lonely and isolating, so we'll talk about the various ways to find connection and affirmation. And we'll explore the grief that can accompany the abandonment of religion and the autonomy that comes with finding a new way forward.

Here's an overview of how we're going to get there. First, we'll explore why people are leaving religion, and I'll give a little extra attention to the special case of religious trauma. We'll also examine what the process of walking away from religion involves and where people might end up. I'll introduce the concept of *religious residue*, which is where previous religious thoughts, feelings, and behaviors linger long after people have stopped identifying as religious—and how this shows up and might create unique challenges. We'll discuss how religion helps people make meaning that calms our existential concerns, so leaving religion can create an existential vacuum and leave people searching for new ways to make sense of their lives and the world around them. Next, we'll explore how to craft a new identity and navigate

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social relationships, especially among those who might not understand your religious changes. Finally, we'll discuss what spirituality after leaving religion might look like, as a way toward flourishing and hope.

## THREE REQUESTS

For this book to be the most useful, I'll make three requests of you, the reader. First, I realize that not everyone reading this book comes from the same place, has the same view on religion, or will (or want to) end up at the same destination. Each of your experiences with religion is as unique as you are, so it'd be foolish to suppose that each of you will need the exact same things from this book. I understand that, and so I have tried to write with your religious diversity in mind. This means at some times, I may be speaking in generalities that don't apply to you or use terms with which you may no longer be comfortable. I've tried my best to be inclusive of the range of experiences you may bring to this book, and in the places I've misspoken or mischaracterized, I ask for your forgiveness, grace, and understanding.

Second, I know that for many, religion has been a source of pain or trauma. Some of you have experienced abuse at the hands of religious leaders or in the name of religion. Nothing can justify or excuse such horrors. I understand that religious hurts cut deeper than many other offenses, and spiritual pain is often complex and long-lasting. The process of leaving religion can be scary, isolating, or even dangerous, depending on your religious upbringing and current living situation. I take these considerations seriously and have tried to keep in mind those realities as I wrote. I am sensitive to the lasting wounds left by religion and have tried to offer empirically based practical advice to navigating your transition away from religion. But there is often no replacement for therapeutic support. If you are a survivor of religious or spiritual trauma or abuse, I strongly recommend you seek support from a licensed mental health therapist who has experience working in

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this domain. It can be powerful, transformative, and healing. So, I also ask that you ensure you seek out a strong support network—friends, family (if possible), and professionals—as you navigate this transition.

Finally, I ask you grant me the acknowledgment that a full understanding of religion requires nuance. Religion is neither the scourge of humanity nor the unblemished crown jewel of human culture. The truth is, religion is somewhere in between—religion has been a force for good and a source of considerable pain and prejudice. And because humans are messy and unpredictable, they interact with religion in myriad ways. I've adopted a scientific approach to examining religion, and the process of leaving religion, including what is good and freeing about it, as well as what is hard and tinged with grief. It's an emotionally and socially complicated process, and any authentically honest discussion of it will acknowledge this. So I ask that you embrace the tension of that difficult nuance.

Gathering together that each of you comes at this from your own unique history with different goals in mind, many of you have experienced significant pain at the hand of religion, and this topic requires holding the tension of nuance, let's look at what science has to say about why people are leaving religion, what this process looks like, and how to craft a meaningful, flourishing life. Thank you for trusting me in this part of your journey. My hope is that this book will be a valuable and comforting companion.

## ONWARD

The landscape of religion is changing. We're experiencing a Great Disillusionment as people are leaving religion. But just because religion no longer fits doesn't mean that we've stopped asking deep and enduring questions. We humans still wrestle with the existential concerns of what makes for a meaningful life, what happens to us after we die, and how to find connection with something larger than ourselves.

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Some of us feel a void in the places where religion offered solace, whereas others feel anger and resentment toward religion in general. Some feel more authentic and free after having changed their beliefs, whereas others simply don't really think much about religion any more. Wherever you are, we'll look at why religion is powerful, why it might be difficult to leave behind, and how to find freedom and flourishing after being disillusioned.