

LEADING QUESTIONS

The Subjects Are Seculars

An Interview with Barry Kosmin

In 2001, members of the faculty at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York conducted the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS 2001), a follow-up study to the 1990 National Survey of Religious Identification. Among other key findings, it showed that 16 percent of respondents judged their outlook as secular or somewhat secular, 35 percent of eighteen to twenty-nine-year-olds stated they had no religion, and the number of unchurched has almost doubled in the ten years between the two surveys.¹ Barry Kosmin, Ph.D., one of the authors of the study, has just been funded with a five-year, \$2.8 million grant at Trinity College (Hartford, Connecticut) to establish the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture (ISSSC) to further the study of secularism.

—DJ Grothe, *FI* Editorial Associate

FREE INQUIRY: What is secularism, and who are the secularists?

BARRY KOSMIN: This is the very question we shall be studying and researching as the focus of our work at ISSSC.

FI: You head the new Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture. Secularism—are you and your colleagues for it or against it?

KOSMIN: We are serious academics, not polemicists. Our job is to study and explain, not missionize. With its program of education, research, and public activities, ISSSC aims to see that secu-

lar ideas and phenomena are clearly understood so that people can make informed choices.

FI: Who is paying for your institute, and why?

KOSMIN: The Posen Foundation,² which has a considerable track record in funding intellectual endeavors in several countries. It funded the American Religious Identification Survey in 2001, one the main findings of which was the doubling in the number of the “no religion” population since 1990.

FI: Is *secularism* a dirty word? Some television commentators have tried to convince us that it is.

KOSMIN: It’s not just an anathema to certain American television commentators with a polemical penchant but also in the Islamic Republic of Iran. With enemies like that. . . .

FI: Some studies suggest that secularism is increasing in America, while others seem to show that religion is advancing in the public square. Which is it?

KOSMIN: Both are correct—the tendency is towards polarization as the middle ground has shrunk with the decline of “liberal religion.” This tendency is most pronounced among young adults in generations X and Y.

FI: Pundits and talking heads often use the term *secular left* as distinct from *the religious right*. Is secularism tied to the political spectrum?

KOSMIN: There is no real evidence to fully substantiate this shorthand in the historical record, especially where economic issues are concerned. The late Pope John Paul II was a religious con-

servative who opposed capital punishment and criticized free-market economics and the war in Iraq. That shows the inaccuracy of such generalizations and “name calling,” unless one thinks that all of politics is confined to abortion and other biomedical and gender issues.

FI: Will religion always be with us?

KOSMIN: Certainly—there is some brain function research that suggests that humans are “hardwired” for spiritual and religious experiences.

FI: Will secularism survive?

KOSMIN: Certainly—many humans are also “hardwired” for rational thinking.

FI: How do people become secularists? Is it by being born in a secularist household? What’s the single greatest predictor of someone becoming a secularist?

KOSMIN: Again, this is something we need to research more; but we know from ARIS 2001 that the profile of the American most likely to be “secular” or not to identify with a religious group or faith tradition is a single male in his twenties with a postgraduate education, a resident in California, Oregon, or Washington state, and of Asian ethnicity.

FI: Is the secularization hypothesis—the notion that as the world becomes more advanced, it becomes more secular—dead in the water?

KOSMIN: No, there is ample evidence that material progress and technology do lead to what Weber called the “disenchantment of the world.” Trends in East Asia—China, Korea, Japan, and so on—should not be overlooked because of the current political focus on the Muslim world or Africa, which are politically and economically unsuccessful and consequently seem to be getting more religious.

FI: What is the one question about secularism you most hope your Institute will answer in the years ahead?

KOSMIN: Your first question: “What is secularism and who are the secularists?” **fi**

Notes

1. For a detailed analysis of this and other surveys documenting the growth in respondents indicating no religious preference, see Otis Dudley Duncan, “The Rise of the Nones” (in two parts), *FREE INQUIRY*, December 2003/January 2004 and February/March 2005.

2. The Posen Foundation is based in Lucerne, Switzerland.

PULL QUOTES

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—*Barry Kosmin*