

The Future of Irreligion, Part 1

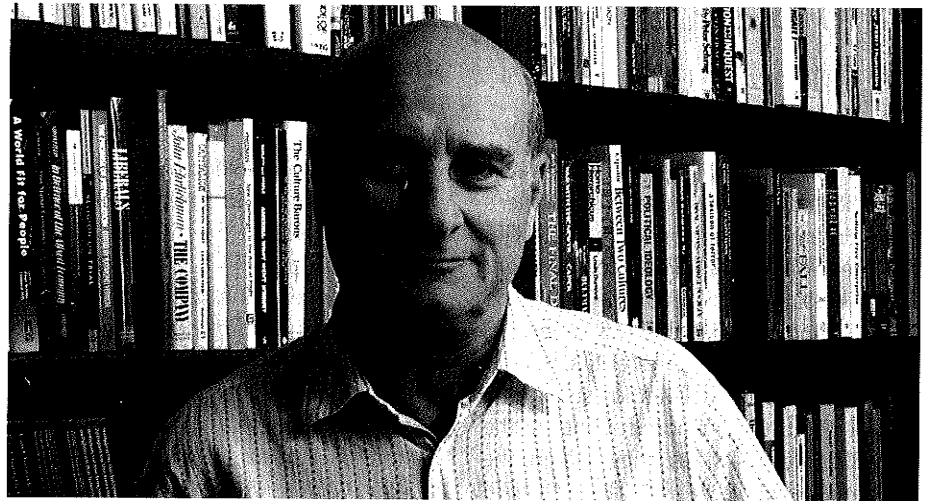
A conversation with Barry A. Kosmin

Barry A. Kosmin is director of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture and a sociologist and research professor in the public policy and law program at Trinity College in Connecticut. He is the nation's leading expert on the growing percentage of Americans who lack a religious identity, the so-called Nones. He's been a principle investigator of the American Religious Identification Survey since it began in 1990. His publications include *One Nation Under God: Religion and Contemporary American Society* (with Seymour P. Lachman, Crown Publishers, 1993) and *Religion in a Free Market: Religious and Non-Religious Americans* (with Ariela Keysar, Paramount Market Publishers, 2006). On a recent episode of Point of Inquiry, the Center for Inquiry's podcast, science journalist and host Chris Mooney spoke with Dr. Kosmin about how the country is changing in regard to religion, why this change is occurring, and its implications for secular advocacy and the separation of church and state.

CHRIS MOONEY: What direction is the country headed with respect to its religious identity? What does the American Religious Identification Survey and its findings about the so-called Nones tell us?

BARRY A. KOSMIN: The United States Census is precluded from asking questions about people's religion or religious identification. So, beginning in 1990 we've conducted what we might call a "time series" survey—the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS). At three points in time, we asked a very large number of people, anywhere between 50,000 and 114,000, a very simple question: "What is your religion, if any?"

Since we started recording data in 1990, the proportion of Americans saying "no religion"—what we might call secularist, nontheist replies—has gone up from 7 percent to 14 or 15 percent, so it's more



than doubled. That would suggest that about fourteen million to thirty-four million adults, extrapolated from our sample, have no religion and don't identify with any of the myriad of religious groups and organizations in the marketplace of religion, which is apparently pretty well stocked.

MOONEY: But they're not all atheists, right?

KOSMIN: The Nones are an amalgam of nontheists and deists and people who don't identify with any religion. You've got the antireligious, the irreligious, the religiously indifferent, deists, agnostics, atheists, anticlericalists, skeptics, secularists, humanists, et cetera, et cetera.

"What is your religion, if any?" is a *belonging* question. Now, when you ask people a *belief* question such as, "Does God exist?" that's where you're going to find many more people being atheist. The atheist population of the country is pretty small. Atheists and agnostics generally are less than 2 percent of the population, and we're talking here about 15 percent, so there's a lot of people among the Nones who may be believers, but they're not believers. A lot of these people don't belong and maybe believe, but a large number of them don't behave very religiously.

Only 50 percent of the population belongs to a religious congregation or claims to be affiliated with one. For questions such as, "Are you going to have a religious funeral?," about 27 percent of the population say they don't particularly want one. Okay, so that's a "no religion" answer, but the number of people who want the clergy to see them off is larger than the number of people who say they have no religion, and it is much larger than the number of people who say that they're atheists. These are kind of shades of grey, if you see evangelicals as white and atheists as black, or vice versa, according to your disposition. But, there's a thousand shades of grey in between, and there are a lot of people in that middle ground, where they're happy with beliefs that may be slightly contradictory or haven't even been worked out.

MOONEY: We often hear about members of the millennial generation that they say in surveys, "I'm not very religious, but I'm quite spiritual." Are those the same kind of people as the Nones or something different?

KOSMIN: Well, that's a belief question. If they answer, "Yeah, well, I'm kind of Buddhist and spiritual," or say that they're

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Methodist, then they'd go into the religion column. If they say "I have no religion, but I'm quite spiritual," it's a different kind of answer but *linked*. The overall rise in the number of people who reject religion—who are irreligious but say that they're spiritual—is linked to another piece that feeds the no-religion or the Nones cohort: anticlericalism. When they say, "I'm spiritual but not religious," they may mean: "I like the world, and maybe there's something divine, but I don't want anything to do with organized religion." What is in effect recruiting *this* population of no-religion people is anticlericalism, a bad vibe people have for very good reasons. Because of religious clergy scandals, people are distancing themselves from religion. It's a symptom, a feeling among the population, an undercurrent.

MOONEY: When you released these findings, you got enormous press attention. Why is America so obsessed with this?

KOSMIN: First of all, it's a kind of man-bites-dog story. We've been told for the last twenty years that there's been this great religious awakening—the rise of the religious Right, evangelicalism on the march, and all the rest of it—and now we see that an equal and opposite reaction was also happening in the section of the population that was being turned off and was moving away from organized religion. Remember, what we're talking about here is not politics but society in general, the whole American people. We extrapolate our 2008 sample of about 54,000 people to 208 million Americans. It's a much larger population than the ninety million who voted.

A great strength of our survey, and one of the reasons people take notice of it, is not just because we have a good design but because ARIS offers a time series. The same questions asked in the same way and using the same method over a twenty-year period gives us the ability to compare across geographical areas and across time and gives the media hard data that can be shown graphically.

MOONEY: The people who went around announcing that the United States is a "Christian nation," by their very act of doing it so loudly, helped to push us into being less of a Christian nation?

KOSMIN: American history has been a kind of a rivalry between two traditions. There's the Pilgrims' tradition of creating a theocracy, a city upon a hill, and then one hundred years later there was a kind of reaction to that when the founding fathers—Jefferson, Madison, Paine, Franklin—wanted to set up a secular republic and, in fact, refuted this idea of a theocracy. So for two hundred years there's been a kind of competition or culture war between these two traditions in the United States.

At certain points, one has been more powerful than the other in the political sphere and among the general public, and we've had Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment bursts. Both of them are American traditions that have been vying with each other for a long time, and you see them play out at different places and times. For example, in the 1840s there was a big debate in the House of Representatives about delivering the mail on Sundays, and exactly the same arguments were being used then that are being used now. People were saying, "It's a Christian nation, the mail shouldn't be delivered on a Sunday." The secularists said, "We're not, in fact, a Christian nation, and Christianity is not an established religion." So for many years the mail was delivered every Sunday.

MOONEY: In terms of this tension between secularism and theocracy, you seem to suggest that the Nones have the momentum, that they will continue to expand in the future. Why is that your expectation?

KOSMIN: First of all, the proportion of people who are secularly minded in terms of belief, belonging, and behavior is much larger among young people than older folks. So the under-twenty-fives are much less religious in all different ways than the over-eighties. There are other factors, such as that younger people have been born into a different society that is much more materialistic.

Let me give you an example: the blue laws that were a carryover from that theocratic Massachusetts of the seventeenth century and restricted hunting, drinking, shopping, and playing sports on Sundays have eroded over the last forty or fifty years, even in the Bible Belt. We've got a 24/7 consumer culture now where one of the most popular pastimes is shopping. Shopping

malls are the new cathedrals in many ways, and more people go to them on Sundays than go to church. Until 1934 there was no baseball on a Sunday. Now, you don't even think about the fact that on Super Bowl Sunday churches close or rearrange their schedules. That's the culture young people are being socialized into. They're not in the world that de Tocqueville described, in which nothing moved on a Sunday—chains were put across the street to stop carriages.

MOONEY: You've said that a lot of this change happened during the 1990s, during the Bill Clinton era. Why?

KOSMIN: We have to look at the social psychology and the political, generational, and economic forces that I've spoken about and ask: When do people risk change? When do they not feel threatened? The answer is in times of peace and prosperity. A good time for secularism and rationalism to develop is when societies are not in crisis. The end of the Cold War made a very big difference. At the beginning of the Cold War, people had anxiety about facing godless communism. That's what brought mention of God onto money and into the Pledge of Allegiance. The traditions of the Pilgrims were on top in the 1950s. Later there was a reaction against this. It was no longer unpatriotic to be godless. People were not anxious about material prosperity. They didn't need supernatural assistance. During that period, people challenged organized religion, and there were social changes such as the beginning of the Internet and the rise of feminism, or at least coed culture. There were big advances in higher education, which I think teaches people to be more skeptical or at least challenging of traditional authority.

A lot of those things were happening in the 1990s, and that meant that the no-religion population that we now call the Nones was growing at about one million people per year. Now, today it grows at about 750,000 per year. It's not that it's petered out, but it's not as vibrant as it was and that probably reflects our more anxious times. ■

To be concluded next issue. This interview was transcribed by Blaize Barnicoat.