

# The Future of Irreligion, Part 2 A Conversation with Barry A. Kosmin

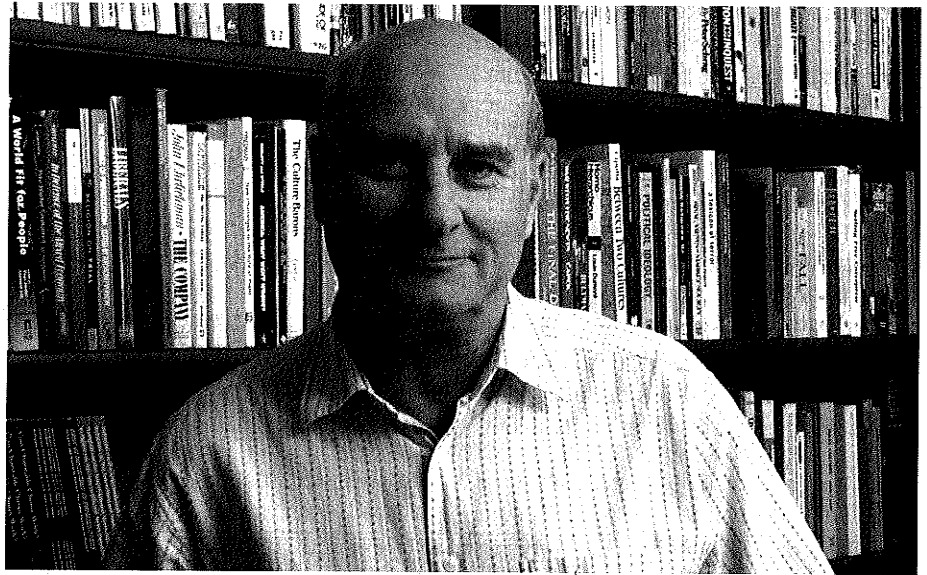
Part 1 of this Leading Questions interview appeared in the April/May 2011 *FREE INQUIRY*. Chris Mooney, a science journalist and host of Point of Inquiry, the Center for Inquiry's podcast, talks with researcher Barry A. Kosmin about his work with the groundbreaking American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), which has identified long-term trends in the religious and nonreligious population, and what these findings mean for secularism in the United States.

Barry Kosmin is the 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. Kosmin has been ARIS's principal investigator since the program 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).

**CHRIS MOONEY:** When the Nones are increasing at the clip that you describe, are there a lot of deconversions? You say that the Nones are largely first-generation.

**BARRY KOSMIN:** We asked the no-religion people: "What were your parents?" Seventeen percent were second-generation Nones. Ten percent had one parent with no religion, so that's 27 percent who came from households where there was no religion or a parental role model without religion.

Now, 18 percent who say they're Nones have parents of different religions. Often when you have parents from two different religions married to one another, the consensual position is to be less religious or nonreligious. So that gives you an idea of how



that population of deconverts is created.

Now, what causes that reaction? It's different things in different parts of the country. One of the findings of the 2008 survey was a particular "bleeding" of Catholics, especially in New England. That was a reaction especially among, interestingly, middle-aged males to the scandals involving priests. Suburbanization, the decline of the Catholic school system, the priest shortage—all those things led to Catholicism producing the largest amount of Nones of any particular religious group. The Catholic Church is losing millions of people in New England, and you know that in that twenty years they didn't all die.

**MOONEY:** What does this mean for the agenda and outlook of secular organizations trying to promote a secular worldview and ensure the separation of church and state?

**KOSMIN:** I certainly think that they're winning, to some extent, the battle of ideas, and social and behavioral trends are going their way. They're not winning organizationally in terms of affiliation, because in the history of American secularism, secularist, nontheist groups have been always particularly weak on recruitment and

organization. By definition they're skeptics, and Nones are more likely to be independents than the rest of the population. They're not joiners; they're skeptical of not only organized religion but of political parties and things like that. Also, a lot of these people are not highly committed to or very interested in theological wars. They despise or dislike religion because it's theologically judgmental or because of its obsession with dogma and doctrine. To some extent, they don't like atheism either, because it appears to be just the other side of the same kind of stuff.

One of the interesting points about this is that we get many more male Nones than we do female Nones—60 to 40. The Nones are the most male group in the United States in terms of religious worldviews. The more you go toward the hard secularist positions, the more male it gets. The Freedom From Religion Foundation did a survey of their members and found that 79 percent of their members were male. That's not exactly a cross section of society. I hear from a lot of women who are turned off by what they call the "war-

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lords of atheism" and what they interpret to be very aggressive attitudes held by Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins and people like that.

People accept that if God exists, he or she doesn't do very much, so they're not really worried about that, but they are worried about organized religion. Political secularism seems to be what they're into. People don't like tax privileges for religion; they're annoyed about textbooks; they're annoyed about clergy interference in politics. Atheists might not like this, but in some ways they're much more interested in the human-action side of no religion than they are in the cerebral, philosophical side.

**MOONEY:** Would that include them being interested in evolution battles or stem-cell battles—those kind of issues?

**KOSMIN:** Yes—in science and naturalism, I think that's one of the major pieces. We can see quite clearly that one of the big differences between the no-religion population and the general population is a belief in human evolution. We posed a question: "Do you think that human beings as we know them developed from an earlier species of animals?" Sixty percent of Nones say that they agree with that statement; among the general population it was about 38 percent. Free inquiry and empiricism—those are the things that appeal to the Nones. That doesn't mean to say that they believe in all of what you might call "political liberalism," because there are a lot of libertarians. Not all support liberal causes, but certainly there is much support in areas such as science, school textbooks, and keeping religious interests out of the public domain, which are classic Jeffersonian-Madisonian positions.

**MOONEY:** According to a Gallup survey that's been repeated many times, the population doesn't seem to have become more accepting of evolution over time. Does your data suggest that, eventually, we're going to see that change?

**KOSMIN:** Certainly amongst the young there are some differences. If you look very closely at the data, you see a very big difference between attitudes toward evolution in general and *human* evolution.

Farmers are quite willing to accept that their dogs evolved from wolves and that our genetically modified tomatoes are different from the ones their grandparents planted. They're not denying a kind of naturalism or change. Human evolution is the problem. Go to any group of teenagers and tell them that 90 percent of their genes are held in common with a mouse. Their eyes widen, and they question your sanity.

That's a problem with our science education. Religious people also have a problem with human evolution—the people who believe the flat earth is five thousand years old, that the dinosaurs coexisted with Adam, and that the Grand Canyon was produced by a flood or something like that. When Darwin was facing it, the opposition's problem was "We're descended from apes, how ridiculous." Well, now scientists have come along and said, "Well, you've got a lot in common with amoeba and a mouse," which seems to be an even more counterintuitive claim.

**MOONEY:** In a world with more Nones, are secular organizations needed more or less, and how are they best to service this growing population?

**KOSMIN:** The secular trend that's being created has not been accomplished by leaders or missionizing activities but by historical societal forces. You might as well ask how the books of Stephen Hawking and the new atheists affected it. It's not that Methodists have been leaving church on Sunday and running down to Barnes and Noble to look for books on atheism and evolution. In fact, it's that the market for those books has been created by these forces. People who are beginning to question things look for explanatory aids.

You should have alternatives to religious congregations offering life-cycle kind of rituals and things like that for this population. I don't know to what extent people want this kind of nontheistic mimicking of organized religion. Obviously there are people who want marriages, burials, and some kind of baby welcoming or naming rituals, but they don't want Jesus, or Allah, or Moses, or anybody like that involved.

Also, I think a political organization could be built around this group that supported unfettered science, accurate textbooks, no tax advantages for religious groups, and generally the fight for Madisonian free-exercise, nonestablishment religion. Those are the kinds of issues where you've got a consensus and a kind of collective identity. But organizations all do different things, and the interesting thing is that this is not like the growth of a religious group or a megachurch. We haven't got charismatic preachers out there winning over the masses at public events. It's happened much more under the radar.

**MOONEY:** If you could sketch a religious picture of America in 2050, what would it look like? Will we become more like Europe?

**KOSMIN:** The Pilgrims' religious traditions are going to be stronger, and you're going to get increased polarization. We know that, at the moment, 15 percent of the country claims no religion, but we also know that about 30 percent of the country is evangelical. Now that ratio may change—I think it may be 20 percent Nones to 25 percent evangelicals within twenty to thirty years—but I still think you'll have the 50 percent in the middle who are kind of liberal religionists or say they just "don't know"—and where those people will turn will be interesting to watch. Which particular group—the atheists or evangelicals—will alienate that middle group the most, or who will recruit from that middle ground the most?

I'm not a prophet: I'm a skeptic and therefore I don't predict the future, but I think the trends are not going to be reversed. I don't think there's going to be any great religious revival because there are some very structural and ethical problems with religion that I don't think it will be able to overcome in the next twenty or thirty years, given our much more educated and questioning public. ■

*This interview was transcribed by Blaize Barnicoat. —Eds.*