

Religion in a Free Market

by Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keysar

A definitive study of religiosity—and secularity—in America, the 2001 *American Religious Identification Survey* (ARIS) became the cornerstone for Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keysar's book, *Religion in a Free Market* (Paramount Market Publishing, 2006), from which the following piece was adapted. Along with analysis of ARIS, *Religion in a Free Market* also spotlights trends in American religiosity, including a significant increase in secularity between 1990 and 2001.

AS ITS TITLE INDICATES, *RELIGION IN A FREE MARKET* IS BUILT UPON ONE KEY IDEA—that religion in America can best be understood as a product or offer in the marketplace of ideas. It is no sacrilege to observe that religious institutions craft sales messages, recruit “customers,” and focus intently on retention policies. The “customers,” in turn, pick from a smorgasbord of religious choices, including the choice of no religion at all. What clergy have observed anecdotally, and other researchers have speculated on, we document scientifically. Among the key findings of this book are:

The share of American adults who say they have no religion rose from 8 percent in 1990 to 14 percent in 2001, which amounts to approximately 30 million people.

Sixteen percent of American adults had switched religious identification at some point in their lives as of 2001, with Catholicism as the biggest numerical loser and “no religion” as the biggest numerical gainer.

A Note on the Methodology

We opted for an open-ended question: What is your religion, if any? This approach takes away the power of classification from the religious institution—the supplier—and gives it to the individual respondent—the autonomous consumer. This methodology has the essential merit of consistency across all religious traditions. It also has the merit of being respectful of our respondents. It is a democratic process where the public decide for themselves who and what they are, using their own words.

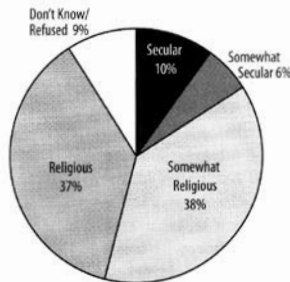
This survey covered a large, national, representative cross-section of the American public, and asked questions about religious identification, belief, and behavior.

STUDYING PEOPLE'S “OUTLOOK” AS A MEANS BY WHICH TO DIFFERENTIATE VARIOUS segments of the population allows us to view the objective facets of behavior associated with affiliation and identification as the consequence of meaningful intentionality. To say that people are “secular” or “religious” is at once both respectful of their own subjective perceptions about the universe and also makes no unwarranted inferences about the strength or weakness of their

psychic attachments to their beliefs or their group loyalty. It thus allows us to characterize the subjective state of mind of the observed population without imposing a possibly invidious construct like identity.

In all, 16 percent of Americans surveyed described their outlook as secular or somewhat secular, while 75 percent described their outlook as religious or somewhat religious.

Outlook of U.S. Adult Population
When it comes to your outlook, do you regard yourself as ... ?



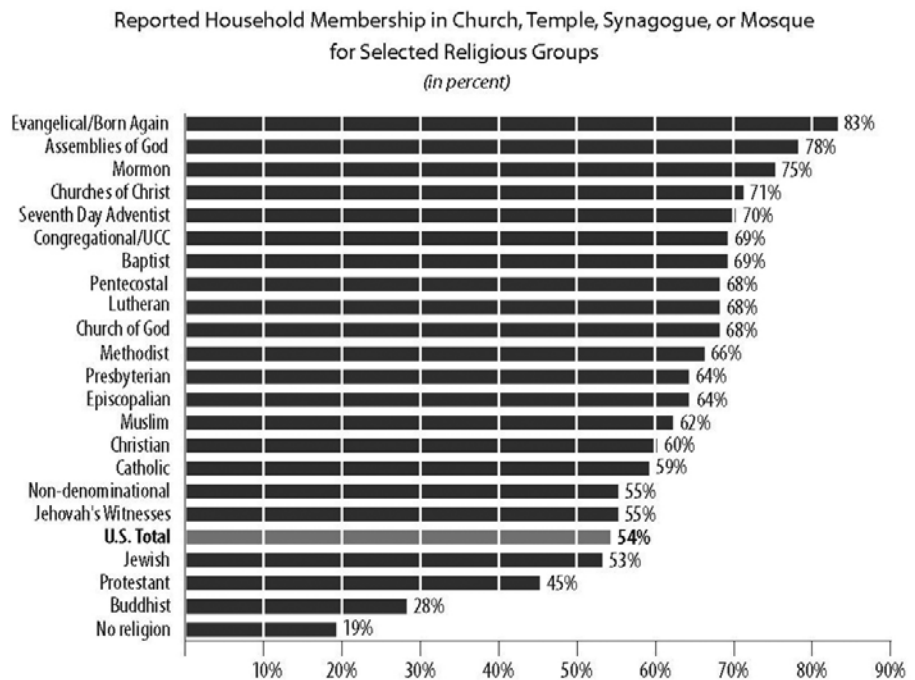
In contrast to Christians, those professing no religion, the New Religious Movements, and Jews were most likely to describe their outlook as “secular” or “somewhat secular”:

RELIGIOUS TRADITION/GROUP	Outlook Scale				ADULT POPULATION IN MILLIONS
	SECULAR	SOMEWHAT SECULAR	SOMEWHAT RELIGIOUS	RELIGIOUS	
Catholic	6%	6%	50%	33%	50.9
Mainline Christian	4	5	48	41	35.8
Methodist	3	5	48	42	14.2
Lutheran	3	6	48	41	9.6
Presbyterian	6	6	46	40	5.6
Episcopalian	7	7	52	32	3.5
United Church of Christ	4	4	55	34	1.4
Baptist	3	3	37	54	33.8
Christian Generic	6	6	37	45	22.5
Christian unspecified	4	6	37	47	14.2
Protestant unspecified	8	7	46	32	4.6
Evangelical/Born Again	7	1	19	70	1.0
Non-denominational	10	5	34	46	2.5
Pentecostal/Charismatic	2	2	26	63	7.8
Assemblies of God	0	2	18	72	1.1
Church of God	0	5	29	65	.9
Pentecostal unspecified	3	2	27	61	4.4
Protestant Denominations	2	3	24	69	5.9
Churches of Christ	0	3	30	65	2.6
Jehovah's Witnesses	5	2	18	73	1.3
Seventh Day Adventist	3	4	19	73	.7
Mormon	2	6	20	68	2.7
Jewish	26	16	41	11	2.8
Eastern Religions	15	11	42	27	2.0
Buddhist	7	15	46	24	1.0
Muslim	9	6	46	32	1.1
NRM & Other Religions	28	9	21	25	1.2
Nones/No religion	39	12	28	8	29.5
U.S. Total Adults	10	6	40	38	208.0

(Rows may not total to 100 percent; Don't Know & Refused responses excluded from table)

There appears to be a significant gap between “identification” with a religion and reported “membership” or “belonging” to an institutional embodiment of that faith. About 30 percent of American adults who identify with a religious group are “unchurched” in that they live in households without any current membership ties to a congregation. That comes out to over 60 million people. Indeed, the 1990’s appears to have been a period in which religious institutional membership slid, underscoring what has been described as the rise of “invisible religion.”

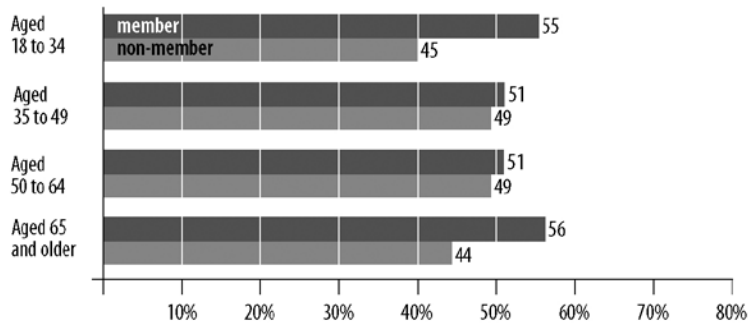
The following chart describes the varied pattern of religious institutional membership among the 22 largest religious groups. These groups (which include “No Religion,” the choice made by an increasingly growing number) encompass nearly 190 million adults, or nearly 92 percent of the adult population. NB: Among adults who identify their religion as Jewish or Judaism, about 53 percent report temple or synagogue membership:



Demography, geography, and social class variables appear to influence the overall pattern of congregational membership, yet the different religious groups clearly have “niche markets.” The following graph refers to Jews by religion, and does not represent the entire ethno-cultural American Jewish population. Overall, synagogue and temple membership rates among Jews were low, but flat in terms of age cohorts.

Age of Respondent by Congregational Membership

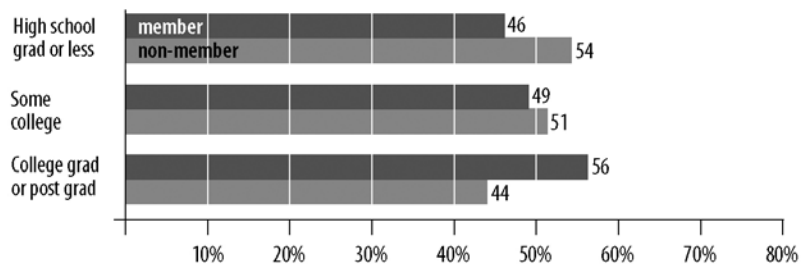
(Jewish identifiers, in percent)



Synagogue membership tended to rise with an increase in educational level among Jews. This familiar pattern is probably associated with households income since synagogue membership is dependent on fees rather than voluntary offerings, and these tend to be higher than for other religious groups.

Educational Level of Respondent by Congregational Membership

(Jewish identifiers, in percent)



The Rise of the No Religion Population

The most significant trend over this decade was the sharp rise in the proportion of the population in the "No Religion" category who did not identify with any religious group. Their share rose from 8.2 percent in 1990 to 14.1 percent of American adults in 2001. The rapid increase in absolute numbers of adults who did not subscribe to any religious identification was such that their number more than doubled, from 14.3 million in 1990 to 29.4 million in 2001. This finding on the sudden and rapid increase of the "No Religion" group was at first received with a lot of skepticism, yet it has since been confirmed by other surveys, including those carried out by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) and the General Social Survey.

One reason why this powerful trend went below the radar was that the “No Religion” group is not organized and issues no press releases for the media to disseminate and comment upon. The root causes of the movement towards irreligion are debatable, but it appears that polarization is taking place in the religious market. An analogy with the law of physics—that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction—would suggest that to some extent increased political power and prominence of evangelical and conservative Christianity and its activist agenda may have alienated other people from religion altogether. Our data clearly shows that the middle ground—the so-called liberal traditions, particularly the Mainline Christians and Jews—have lost ground in recent years.

The implications of a substantial and growing segment of the adult population who profess no religion could have enormous ramifications in several spheres, including society and politics. At a time when “values” is the new battleground, the more secularized and more religious forces appear more polarized than ever on issues like stem-cell research. The same religious/secular divide is present on a host of “culture war” issues ranging from science teaching, to assisted suicide, to same-sex marriage, to the death penalty, to gun control.

These issues are at the heart of current debates within American society. If the young cohort in the “No Religion” category maintains their secular preferences as they get older, the consequences—both politically and socially—could very well be profound.

Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keysar currently serve as director and associate director, respectively, of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture (ISSC) at Trinity College. Dr. Kosmin is a sociologist and the author of *One Nation Under God* (Three Rivers Press, 1993), as well as the co-editor (with Paul Ignaski) of *The New Antisemitism?: Debating Judeophobia in the 21st Century* (Profile Books, 2003). Dr. Keysar is a demographer, a professor at Trinity College’s Public Policy and Law program, and a former Senior Research Fellow at Brooklyn College, City University of New York. Dr. Kosmin and Dr. Keysar have worked together on numerous scholarly projects; they collaborated with Egon Mayer on the seminal *American Jewish Identification Survey* (2001). In addition to *Religion in a Free Market*, they are the co-authors of two previous books: *The Next Generation: Jewish Children and Adolescents* (with Jeffrey Scheckner, State University of New York Press, 2000) and *Religion and Political Party Preference* (Paramount, 2004).

The above piece was adapted from *Religion in a Free Market*, and published with permission of the authors.

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