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No Religion

A profile of America's unchurched

Writing from the vantage point of an anthropologist of religion, Diana Eck has observed that “We the people’ of the United States now form the most profusely religious nation on earth.” The American Religious Identification

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Survey (ARIS), conducted by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, certainly tends to support this notion: in 2001, 80% of the adult population identified with one or another religion group.

Often lost amidst the mesmerizing tapestry of faith groups that make up this large majority, though, is the vast and growing population of those who do not belong to it. These individuals adhere to no creed, nor do they choose to affiliate with any religious community. They are the seculars, the unchurched, the people who profess no religion.

Since the mid-1960s, when Harvard theologian Harvey Cox’s best-selling *The Secular City* ushered in a brief era of “secular-

ization,” American religion has been widely perceived as leaning toward the more literal, fundamental and spiritual. Particularly since the election in 1976 of President Jimmy Carter, a self-avowed, born-again Christian, America has been seen as going through a period of great religious reawakening.

In sharp contrast to that perception, ARIS, which was conducted as a follow-up to the 1990 National Survey of Religious Identification, has detected a wide and possibly growing swath of secularism among Americans.

When ARIS asked, “What is your religion, if any?” the greatest increase since 1990 in absolute as well as in percentage terms was found among those adults who responded “none.” The estimated 27.5 million who did

not have a religion encompassed more than one in every eight adult Americans.

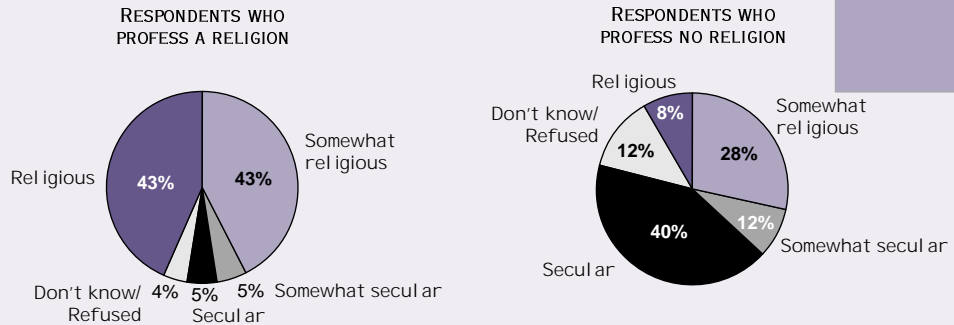
If we add those who identified themselves as atheists, agnostics, humanists and seculars, the number increases to an estimated 29.5 million adults, a figure that has more than doubled since 1990, and comprises 14.1% of the adult population, as compared to just 8% in the earlier study.

Figure 1

Some With No Religion Are Religious

Question:

When it comes to your outlook, do you regard yourself as secular, somewhat secular, somewhat religious, or religious?



Source: ARIS 2001 survey by The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, February-June, 2001.

Who are the people defined as “nones?” What is their demographic profile? What is their outlook? Are they typically nonbelievers in the divine who are unaffiliated with religious institutions? How does this growing segment of the American population compare with the approximately 167 million US adults who identify with a religion?

ARIS brought to light some fascinating demographic differences between people who profess a religion and those who do not:

- In 2001, men were more likely than women to profess no religion—59% of “nones” were men. In contrast, 47%

of adults who professed a religion were men.

- Young people were more likely to profess no religion—33% of “nones” were less than 30 years old. In comparison, only 20% of all respondents who professed a religion were less than 30 years old.
- “No-religion” respondents were far more likely to be single and either never married or living with a partner (39% for “nones” and 22% for those who professed a religion). And the “nones” were less likely than those who professed a religion to be married (48% vs. 60%).

There were hardly any differences in educational attainment level between people who professed a religion and those who did not. For instance, about 10% in both groups had not graduated high school. Nine percent of those who professed a religion and 11% of those who did not had graduate school degrees or more.

And there were few surprises in the geographic distribution of “nones” in the study, which reflected the close relationship between religion and region in the United States. Despite the growing diversity nationally, some religious groups clearly occupied a dominant demographic position in particular states, with no-religion residents appearing in diametrical opposition.

Historical traces of an irreligious West and the Bible Belt in the South were still evident in this distribution. Those with no religion constituted the largest group in Washington state (25%), Oregon (21%), Colorado (21%), Wyoming (20%), and Nevada (20%). In contrast, the percentage of “nones” was 10% or below in the Bible Belt states of the Carolinas, Ala-

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Fielding ARIS 2001

The American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) is a ten-year follow-up study of religious identification among American adults, and the first such large-scale national survey conducted in the twenty-first century. Carried out under the auspices of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, the widely quoted 1990 National Survey of Religious Identification (NSRI) was the most extensive survey of religious identification in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Both studies were undertaken because the US Census does not produce a religious profile of the American population. Yet the religious categories into which a population sorts itself are surely no less important than some of the other socio-demographic categories that are enumerated by the decennial census.

The 1990 NSRI was a very large survey in which 113,723 persons were questioned about their religious preferences. However, it provided for no further detailed questioning of respondents regarding their religious beliefs or involvement, or the religious composition of their households. ARIS 2001 took steps to enhance both the range and the depth of the topics covered.

For example, new questions were introduced concerning religious beliefs and affiliation as well as religious change and the religious identification of spouses. Although budget limitations necessitated a reduction in the number of respondents, the 2001 survey still covered a very large national sample of over 50,000 respondents, providing a high level of confidence for the results and adequate coverage of most religious groups

and key geographical units, such as states and major metropolitan areas.

The findings, weighted to be representative of the US adult population, include national and state-by-state examinations of religious identification in relation to racial or ethnic identification, education, age, marital status, voter registration status, political party preference, and household size and income.

In addition to producing a much richer data set that goes far beyond the mere question of religious preference, the innovations allowed for a much more sophisticated analysis than the NSRI. The data offer a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics of religion in contemporary American society, and especially how religious adherence relates to countervailing secularizing trends.

The information collected is also potentially very useful for the various national religious bodies. Most other religious data on the population are drawn from the administrative records of the various religious bodies, churches and denominations themselves, each of which has its own criteria for membership. ARIS provides a uniform approach that includes both affiliated and unaffiliated adherents.

A truly national survey has to aim to cover the entire country geographically, have an adequate number of respondents to give statistical precision, provide maximum theoretical opportunity for any person to participate, and be conducted according to the highest professional standards.

bama, Mississippi and Tennessee, as well as in North and South Dakota.

A large proportion of the no-religion group was politically independent. Seventeen percent said they were Republicans, 30% Democrats, and 43% independents. Among Catholics, the largest single religion group, 28% thought of themselves as Republicans, 36% as Democrats and 30% as independent.

One of ARIS's most significant findings was the large gap between the percentage of the total adult population

that identified with a religion (80%) and the percentage that reported living in households where either they or someone else was a member of an organized religious body (54%). Even among respondents who professed a religion, only 63% lived in households where somebody belonged to a church, temple or mosque. (Only 19% of those who professed no religion were in households with a religious membership.)

This gap draws attention to the difference between religious identification as a state of heart and mind and affiliation as a social condition.

Apart from exploring respondents' identification—or lack of it—with a religion, ARIS sought to determine whether and to what extent Americans considered their outlook on life to be essentially religious or secular.

Detecting people's worldview or outlook with respect to religion is potentially very challenging. Some would argue that it cannot be done at all with the tools of survey research. Yet, much can be gained by asking rather simple questions of a broad and representative spectrum of people. While

Respondents to ARIS were interviewed over a span of approximately four months using the CATI (computer-assisted telephone interviewing) system. The large sample size allowed good coverage of the religious makeup of minorities such as African Americans, providing the opportunity to publish special ARIS Reports on the religious profile of the US Hispanic population and the socio-demographic profile of US Muslims.

The ARIS sample was based on a series of national random digit dialing (RDD) surveys, utilizing the GENESYS Sampling system of all known US residential telephone numbers, and conducted through ICR—International Communication Research—as part of their EXCEL and ACCESS national telephone omnibus services.

EXCEL is the research industry's largest telephone omnibus service and has been in continuous operation for over fifteen years. These surveys are fielded at least twice a week, both covering the weekend, with each having a minimum of 1,000 interviews. Approximately half of respondents are female and half male. The sample gives proportionate coverage across the contiguous 48 states and employs basic geographical stratification at the Census Division level.

Within a household, the respondent is chosen using the last birthday method of random selection; in theory, every adult in every telephone-owning household in the US has an equal chance of being selected for interview. Five attempts are made to speak to a respondent at each selected number before the computer chooses another household.

In order to reflect the nation's geography accurately, the replacement number is usually drawn from the same area code and exchange. This means that a non-responding telephone number in South Texas is replaced by another number in South Texas, and that one in Miami is replaced by another in Miami. This method obviously also assists with the goal of properly representing spatially-concentrated minority groups, such as the Hispanic population, in the national survey.

One of the distinguishing features of this survey, as of its predecessor in 1990, is that respondents were asked to describe themselves in terms of religion with an open-ended question. Interviewers did not prompt or offer a suggested list of potential answers.

Moreover, the self-description of respondents was not based on whether established religious bodies, institutions, churches, mosques or synagogues considered them to be members. Quite to the contrary, the survey sought to determine whether the respondents themselves regarded themselves as adherents of a religious community. Subjective rather than objective standards of religious identification were tapped.

In the 1990 survey, the question wording was, "What is your religion?" In the 2001 survey, the clause, "...if any" was added to the question. A subsequent validity check based on cross-samples of 3,000 respondents carried out by ICR in 2002 found no statistical difference between the pattern of responses according to the two wordings.

At 5.7%, the overall refusal rate for the question was very low.

not much will be learned about any one individual, great insights can be assembled about the mindscape of diversity in the American population as a whole.

Respondents to ARIS were asked, "When it comes to your outlook, do you regard yourself as secular, somewhat secular, somewhat religious, or religious?" The answer categories were rotated, and respondents were permitted to indicate that they were unsure or that their outlook was mixed.

Ninety-three percent of respondents were able to reply to the outlook question without much difficulty. As expected, those who professed no religion were eight times as likely to regard themselves as secular as those who professed a religion (see Figure 1).

Again, the fact that 85% of people who professed a religion regarded themselves as either somewhat religious or religious is not surprising. Yet, somewhat counterintuitively, 35% of "nones" regarded themselves as religious, although the majority of them

opted for the more ambiguous category of somewhat religious. In all, only about half of adults who professed no religion described their outlooks as secular.

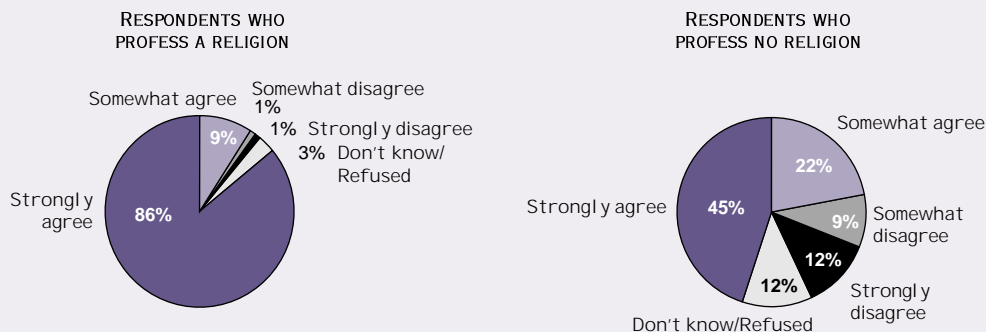
We also sought to learn more about people's religious beliefs. Respondents were asked to express their opinions in a series of questions pertaining to their belief in the divine.

Not surprisingly, a strong majority who professed a religion said they believed

Figure 2
Some With No Religion Are Believers

Question:

Do you agree or disagree that God exists?



Source: ARIS 2001 survey by The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, February-June, 2001.

that God exists; 86% agreed strongly (see Figure 2). Only two-thirds of adults who professed no religion agreed that God exists; 45% agreed strongly.

Clearly, the no-religion group was diverse in its belief in God. Its pie was distributed, though not evenly, among the various categories of opinions. People who professed a religion were by far more uniform, even though they represented many different religious groups. Some were poles apart in their religious outlook.

Interestingly, only 21% of respondents who professed no religion disagreed with the statement that God exists, and only 12% disagreed strongly. If probed, some of the no-religion group might have illuminated our understanding on what they meant when they said, "God exists." This is left for in-depth study of people who profess no religion.

The large and growing number of American adults who adhere to no religion, or describe

themselves as atheists, agnostic or secular, is quite diverse. Some are genuinely secular, neither adhering to a creed nor choosing to affiliate with any religious community. They also regard their outlook as secular and do not agree that "God exists."

But the strictly secular represent only one part of those who profess no religion, perhaps one-fifth of them. A much larger proportion of the "nones" are far from die-hard atheists or even

agnostics. It is more accurate to describe them as unaffiliated than as non-believers.

ARIS shows the rapid and little-noticed growth in the share of US adults who profess no religion. It also paints a nuanced picture of America's unchurched—a portion of the population that clearly deserves further study. ●

ARIS 2001 can be read online at www.gc.cuny.edu/studies/aris_index.htm

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