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## An Interview with the Guy Who Named the 'Nones'

By Wendy Thomas Russell | January 10, 2013 | [no comments](#)

There was a time, in the extremely recent past, when Americans with no religion were “the others.”

For decades, religious affiliation has fascinated researchers. Countless studies and surveys show document a painstaking analysis of each minor population shift. A switch from, say, Methodist to Baptist or Catholic to Protestant has been marked with great interest, year by year. Sure, the numbers of Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists have remained relatively small next to Christians — but they, too, have been counted. Their numbers seemed to matter.



Always absent from these studies and surveys was a specific category for Americans with no religion. Those of us who didn't “belong” in an established group — for whatever reason. We were simply the “others.” Too few to name, much less care about.

But that all changed in the first years of the 21st Century.

After a decade (the 90s) in which religious affiliation dropped dramatically — by several percentage points (and, yes, that was considered dramatic) — the country's top researchers realized they needed a new category.

Barry A. Kosmin was one of them. As the founding director of the Institute for

the Study of Secularism in Society and a professor at Trinity College, Kosmin had been helping to conduct the [American Religion Identification Survey](#) for nearly three decades. Once they'd evaluated data from the 1990s, Kosmin and his team were determined to name a new category.

"Nonreligious" was a possibility. So was "non-faith" and "non-affiliated."

But Kosmin rejected all of these. The "non" part bothered him. "Non-affiliated" would be like calling people "non-white," he said. "We didn't want to suggest that 'affiliated' was the norm, and every one else was an 'other.'"

"Nomenclature," he added, "is quite important in these things."

So Kosmin began calling this group the "nones," a shortened version for "none of the above" — which is what people often said when asked to name their religion. He never thought the term would stick.

"It began as a joke," he said, "but now, like many of these things, it has taken on its own life."

Indeed. Today, "nones" are everywhere. Both in a literal sense and a *literary* one.

"Nones" now make up an estimated 20 percent of the American population — or 60 million people. And most major research groups have given in to the verbiage, at least to some degree. (Some still prefer "unaffiliated" in their official questionnaires.) Journalists, especially, have embraced the word.

"Nones form Biggest Slice of Obama's Religious Voters," said an October headline in the Huffington Post.

"The 'nones' now form the worlds' third-largest religion" reported the Religion News Service last month.

The list goes on and on.

That's not to say the word is without its critics. For many on the more spiritual end of the "nonreligious" spectrum, "nones" sounds too dismissive. They liken it to "nothing," and sometimes the response is: "I'm not nothing!"

Still, like Kosmin said, the word now has a life of its own. Even Gallup Poll, which published [a report today](#), saying that the number of people who prefer “no religion” leveled off a bit between 2011 and 2012, put “nones” in its headline.

[Special thanks to Hemant Mehta who referenced this blog on his website [The Friendly Atheist](#).]

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