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Survey Shows U.S. Religious Tolerance

By [NEELA BANERJEE](#)

Although a majority of Americans say religion is very important to them, nearly three-quarters of them say they believe that many faiths besides their own can lead to salvation, according to a survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

The report, titled [U.S. Religious Landscape Survey](#), reveals a broad trend toward tolerance and an ability among many Americans to hold beliefs that might contradict the doctrines of their professed faiths.

For example, 70 percent of Americans affiliated with a religion or denomination said they agreed that “many religions can lead to eternal life,” including majorities among Protestants and Catholics. Among evangelical Christians, 57 percent agreed with the statement, and among Catholics, 79 percent did.

Among minority faiths, more than 80 percent of Jews, Hindus and Buddhists agreed with the statement, and more than half of Muslims did.

The findings seem to undercut the conventional wisdom that the more religiously committed people are, the more intolerant they are, scholars who reviewed the survey said.

“It’s not that Americans don’t believe in anything,” said Michael Lindsay, assistant director of the Center on Race, Religion and Urban Life at [Rice University](#). “It’s that we believe in everything. We aren’t religious purists or dogmatists.”

The survey confirms findings from previous studies that the most religiously and politically conservative Americans are those who attend worship services most frequently, and that for them, the battles against abortion and gay rights remain touchstone issues.

“At least at the time of the surveys in 2007, cultural issues played a role in political affiliation,” and economic issues less so, said John C. Green, an author of the report and a senior fellow on religion and American politics at Pew. “It suggests that the efforts of Democrats to peel away Republican and conservative voters based on economic issues face a real limit because of the role these cultural issues play.”

The survey, which is based on telephone interviews with more than 35,000 Americans from May 8 to Aug. 13, 2007, is the second installment of a broad assessment Pew has undertaken of trends and characteristics of the country’s religious life. The first part of the report, published in February, depicted a fluid and diverse national religious life marked by people moving among denominations and faiths.

According to that report, more than a quarter of adult Americans have left the faith of their childhood to join another religion or no religion. Every denomination and religion lost and gained members, but the survey indicated that the group that had the greatest net gain was the unaffiliated. Sixteen percent of American

adults say they are not part of any organized faith, which makes the unaffiliated the country's fourth-largest "religious group."

The new report sheds light on the beliefs of the unaffiliated. Like the overwhelming majority of Americans, 70 percent of the unaffiliated said they believed in God, including one of every five people who identified themselves as atheist and more than half of those who identified as agnostic.

"What does atheist mean? It may mean they don't believe in God, or it could be that they are hostile to organized religion," Mr. Green said. "A lot of these unaffiliated people, by some measures, are fairly religious, and then there are those who are affiliated with a religion but don't believe in God and identify instead with history or holidays or communities."

The most significant contradictory belief the survey reveals has to do with salvation.

Previous surveys have shown that Americans think a majority of their countrymen and women will go to heaven, and that the circle is wide, embracing minorities like Jews, Muslims and atheists. But the Pew survey goes further, showing that such views are held by those within major branches of Christianity and minority faiths, too.

Scholars said such tolerance could stem in part from the greater diversity of American society: that there are more people of minority faiths or no faith and that "it is hard to hold a strongly sectarian view when you work together and your kids play soccer together," Mr. Lindsay said.

But such a view of salvation may also grow out of doctrinal ignorance, scholars said.

"It could be that people are not very well educated and they are not expressing mature theological points of view," said Todd Johnson, director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. "It could also be a form of bland secularism. The real challenge to religious leaders is not to become more entrenched in their views, but to navigate the idea of what their religion is all about and how it relates to others."

The survey tried to determine how people's religious affiliation and practice shaped their views of culture and politics.

As past surveys have shown, this report found that Americans who prayed more frequently and attended worship services more often tended to be more conservative and "somewhat more Republican" than other people. Majorities of Mormons and evangelicals say they are conservative, compared with 37 percent of Americans over all. (Twenty percent say they are liberal, and 36 percent say moderate.)

Respondents were evenly split about whether churches should express their views about politics, with evangelicals and black Protestants favoring such activities far more than people of other faiths.

Nearly two-thirds of respondents favored more government help for the poor, even if it meant going deeper into debt. Sixty-one percent of respondents also said "stricter environmental laws and regulations are worth the cost."

A majority said the United States should pay more attention to problems at home than those abroad, but in

the area of foreign policy, 6 out of 10 respondents said that diplomacy, not military strength, was the best way to ensure peace.

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