



Written by [James Heiser](#) on September 28, 2010

## Are Americans “Deeply Ignorant” Regarding Religion?

What do most Americans know about various world religions? According to a recent study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, not very much. But the questions posed by the study may raise more questions about its methodology than is revealed about the state of religious education in modern America.



Self-identified atheists and agnostics answered a few more of the study’s 32 questions correctly than did “White evangelical Protestants” or “White Catholics.” On average, atheists/agnostics scored 20.9 correct answers, while the other two groups averaged 17.6 and 16.0, respectively. But the review of many of the questions feels more like a game of Trivial Pursuit™ than a serious survey of religious knowledge.

The *New York Times* article on the study (“[Basic Religion Test Stumps Many Americans](#)”) leads with the declaration:

Americans are by all measures a deeply religious people, but they are also deeply ignorant about religion.

Later, the article becomes more specific in its identification of such “ignorance”:

- Clergy members who are concerned that their congregants know little about the essentials of their own faith will no doubt be appalled by some of these findings:
- Fifty-three percent of Protestants could not identify Martin Luther as the man who started the Protestant Reformation.
- Forty-five percent of Catholics did not know that their church teaches that the consecrated bread and wine in holy communion are not merely symbols, but actually become the body and blood of Christ.
- Forty-three percent of Jews did not know that Maimonides, one of the foremost rabbinical authorities and philosophers, was Jewish.

Despite the opinions of *The New York Times*, most clergymen are quite aware of such ignorance, and also the way in which such studies can be affected by casual denominational or religious “affiliation,” which is more likely a matter of family tradition or other non-religious factors rather than consistent participation in the worship life of a religious tradition. Thus, for example, the ignorance of nominal Catholics regarding the doctrine of transubstantiation or nominal Protestants regarding salvation by grace is hardly “news” to those Christians who actively participate in the life of their churches.

Buried in the *New York Times* story are several revealing facts:



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The researchers said that the questionnaire was designed to represent a breadth of knowledge about religion, but was not intended to be regarded as a list of the most essential facts about the subject. Most of the questions were easy, but a few were difficult enough to discern which respondents were highly knowledgeable.

On questions about the Bible and Christianity, the groups that answered the most right were Mormons and white evangelical Protestants.

On questions about world religions, like Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism, the groups that did the best were atheists, agnostics and Jews.

Thus when casual affiliation has been excluded from consideration, one might expect that the results of the study are significantly less dramatic. Given the secularized character of modern society, where *in depth* religious discussions are regularly excluded from public education, political discourse and most forms of entertainment, the primary form of religious instruction that will take place is in the context of one's own religious community, and generally the focus in such a context will be on teaching one's own tradition. One cannot exclude meaningful discussions of religion (which are not to be confused with brief hubbubs about "hot button" issues) from the public square, and then cluck one's tongue at the ignorance of the general public on matters which they are told polite people do not discuss.

Furthermore, it is hardly surprising that self-identified atheists would score relatively higher in knowledge of religions generally viewed as "non-traditional" in an American context, because those individuals who have little interest in religion, or who are interested primarily in their own beliefs are far less likely to find it necessary to gain a detailed knowledge of other religions. The self-designation of "atheist" is still relatively rare in American society; the decision to declare oneself to be such — rather than simply invoke a vague and noncommittal theism — usually indicates that such a person is quite passionate regarding their religious viewpoint.

One interesting response which has not gotten as much attention in reporting on the study is the ongoing dissent from evolutionary dogma: 40 percent of respondents agreed with the statement "humans and other living things have existed in their present form since the beginning of time."



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