

How well do you know religions?

A groundbreaking new study on the religious knowledge of Americans was released last week, and the results will be surprising to some.

The U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey, conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life, asked about 3,400 people to answer 32 basic questions about Christianity, world religions and the role of religion in American life.

The average respondent got about half right, and while the folks at Pew refused to issue a grade we all know that scoring 50 percent on most tests does not earn you an A.

Other studies, including Pew's own 2008 American Religious Landscape survey, have shown Americans are much more likely to identify themselves as religious than residents of other industrialized nations. Almost 84 percent of us claim an affiliation with one religion or another. But the new survey uncovered a striking gap in knowledge not just about "other" religions but in many of the respondents' own traditions.

Little knowledge

Americans may be very religious, but many of us still don't know much about the Bible or the history of Christianity. More than a third could not identify Genesis as the first book of the Bible. Only 39 percent could identify Job as the biblical figure who remained true to his faith in God despite terrible suffering. Less than half could name the four Gospels that open the New Testament. And Martin Luther? Just 46 percent could identify him as a leading figure of the Reformation.

Our knowledge of other religions is even less impressive. Less than half of the survey



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respondents knew the Jewish sabbath begins on Friday. Only 46 percent could identify the Quran as the holy book of Islam. Just 47 percent correctly associated the Dalai Lama with Buddhism. And a scant 27 percent recognized Islam as the dominant religion of Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country.

Our understanding of the role of religion in public life was also found lacking. Though a solid 68 percent could identify what the Constitution says about religion in general terms, their understanding of the application of that tradition was poor.

While 89 percent knew that a public school teacher cannot legally lead a class in prayer, only 36 percent knew that public schools may offer courses in comparative religion. And a bare 23 percent realized that it is also legal to teach the Bible as literature in public schools.

Atheists, agnostics

More than a few Americans will be surprised to learn that the group scoring the highest were self-identified atheists and agnostics, who averaged 20.9 correct answers out of 32. Close behind were Jews and Mormons, at 20.5 and 20.3 respectively. Well back in the pack were white Catholics (16) and Protestants (15.8), followed by "nothing in particular." At the bottom of the list were black

Protestants (13.4) and Hispanic Catholics (11.6), who scored only slightly better than half as well as the atheists/agnostics.

In an era marked by increasingly divisive religious debates, de facto religious litmus tests for political candidates and growing hostility toward those whose beliefs fall outside perceived norms, the fact that many Americans cannot even answer simple questions about their own traditions reliably should give us pause.

Who are we to condemn members of other faiths when we know almost nothing about them? Why should we demand an elected official profess a particular set of beliefs when many of us don't even understand the implications of those beliefs? And if we are such a religious nation, why are so many of us unable to answer even basic questions about such mainstream texts as the Bible?

One way to address this shocking deficit in knowledge might be to assign an atheist to lead a study group in every religious congregation in the country. Or people might just open their minds, talk to their neighbors, and read a book or two about some belief system outside their own.

But foremost, all of us might try to remember the Golden Rule. Although 45 percent in the Pew survey incorrectly identified it as one of the Ten Commandments, it's really a decent philosophy for anyone to follow, no matter what their faith.

This is the opinion of Derek Larson, who teaches history and environmental studies at the College of St. Benedict/St. John's University. He welcomes your comments at twg@anderson-larson.net. His column is published the first Wednesday of the month.

* On the back on the 3. "made you think" moments.

Bible in schools

Why do people make such a big fuss about whether or not President Obama is Christian or Muslim?

Why do you think Atheists scored the best on the religion survey?

Aw! Not biased or willing to learn

People that are skeptical + hold doubt about deities.

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