

First global study of religion and education shows progress, gaps

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [January 18, 2017](#) issue

The first-ever global study of religion and education shows that Jews are more highly educated than any other religious group, while Hindus and Muslims are the least educated.

Jews go to school for 13 years on average, and Muslims and Hindus for six years, according to the [recently released report from the Pew Research Center](#). Christians are the second-highest educated religious group in the world, with an average of nine years of education, followed by the religiously unaffiliated, and then Buddhists.

The study shows vast gaps among religious groups in educational attainment. But education levels globally are rising for all faith groups.

“Even those groups that are relatively disadvantaged are making considerable progress across generations,” said Conrad Hackett, the study’s lead researcher. “That’s a story of hope if you consider getting more education to be a good thing.”

These global findings differ from data for the United States, where Muslims and Hindus are often better educated than the Christian majority. As in many countries, highly educated minorities have been welcomed and often have the means to migrate. In the United States, 96 percent of Hindus and 54 percent of Muslims hold a college degree, compared to 36 percent of Christians.

Globally, Hindus and Muslims “have made the biggest educational gains in recent generations,” the Pew report concludes. While the oldest generation of Muslims studied has 3.5 years of schooling and the oldest Hindu generation has four years, the youngest for both religions has seven.

Among the poorly educated, there is a gender gap, though it is shrinking. Hindu women rank at the very bottom of the study, but in the youngest generation there is a two-year difference between men and women in years of schooling, compared to three for the oldest generation.

While the overall global picture is one of progress, it also reveals educational poverty.

“The global norm is barely more than a primary education—an average of about eight years of formal schooling for men and seven years for women,” the report concludes.

Education is highly correlated with religion. Four in ten Hindus and more than one-third of Muslims have no formal schooling, while one in ten Buddhists and only one in a hundred Jews lack any education. The factors driving these disparities include differing attitudes toward education within religious groups and their various distribution among societies where education is compulsory and valued. Some scholars have argued that the work of Christian missionaries has had a positive effect on education levels.

As for the particularly high level of educational attainment among the world’s 13 million Jews, “there’s a culture of literacy that predates modernity,” said Steven M. Cohen, a professor of Jewish social policy at Hebrew Union College who advised the Pew researchers on the study. Jewish tradition has demanded literacy from its adherents, at least among men, and not just its religious leaders.

“Jews need to learn Hebrew in order to pray—they need to pray from a prayer book,” Cohen said. “Jewish prayer services are just much more participatory. They require more familiarity with the text, as opposed to reserving the study of sacred text for an elite.”

And for millennia, anti-Semitism prevented Jews from owning land and farming and otherwise limited their choices for making a living, so they were forced into more entrepreneurial jobs, such as trading, which required literacy and numeracy, Cohen said.

Asked if the study might unintentionally fuel rising anti-Semitism, which today as in the past traffics in conspiracy theories that paint Jews as clever and conniving, Cohen said it shouldn’t make a difference.

“Anti-Semites are already convinced,” he said. “But I know many Jews are still worried about their place in society, and worry about appearing too successful, because that’s been an anti-Semitic trope.”

The wide gap between the world's best and least educated groups is also partly a function of where these groups tend to live in the world, the Pew researchers found. The vast majority of Jews live in either the United States or Israel, highly developed countries with high levels of education overall. By contrast, 98 percent of Hindu adults live in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, where a solid education is available to only a minority. The study relied on the best and most recent data available from 151 countries, representing 95 percent of the world's population. The numbers indicate the quantity of education, but do not indicate its relative quality.

Among the study's findings:

- The youngest generations of Christian, Buddhist, and religiously unaffiliated women have achieved educational parity with men in average years of schooling. And the average Jewish woman has spent a year more in school than the average Jewish man.
- Christians, the world's largest religious group with 2.2 billion adherents, have remained fairly stable at the global level in their overall educational attainment over three generations. But their cumulative years of schooling vary widely by region.
- Religiously unaffiliated adults have 1.3 more years of schooling, on average, than religiously affiliated adults overall (8.8 versus 7.5 years). Researchers hypothesize that this is partly because the unaffiliated are disproportionately concentrated in countries with relatively high overall levels of educational attainment.

The data returned many surprises, Hackett said. Gaps between groups in education were often wider than researchers predicted, even within the same nation.

"We see this huge gap in sub-Saharan Africa between Christians and Muslims," Hackett said. Hackett hopes such findings spur government and other leaders to factor in religion as they try to raise education levels overall.

"Religion along with education are two of the things that have the biggest influence on our life outcomes, along with the kind of family we have and the kind of job we have," he said. —Religion News Service

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