

Survey finds Americans flexible on faith tenets and interpretations: The Pew Religious Landscape Survey

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Think you know what Americans believe about religion? Think again.

- Seven in ten Americans who follow one particular faith believe that many religions can lead to eternal life.
- Asked if there is “more than one true way to interpret” the teachings of their faith, 82 percent of mainline Protestants and 77 percent of Catholics said yes. A majority of evangelicals (53 percent) also agreed with that statement.
- More than one-fourth of people not affiliated with a faith nevertheless attend religious services at least occasionally. And about 20 percent of self-identified atheists still believe in God as an impersonal force or spirit.

A report released June 23 by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life demonstrates the myriad ways that faith in America is more nondogmatic and nuanced than it may appear.

Pew’s second set of results from its U.S. Religious Landscape Survey (its first report in February documented the numbers and geographic distribution of believers) analyzed the religious practices of more than 35,000 U.S. adults.

Pew researchers found that Americans are not as doctrinaire or isolationist in their beliefs as many might think. Rather, they embrace their own faith while respecting—and sometimes even practicing—aspects of other religions.

“Many religions—maybe even most—can be perceived as having an exclusivity clause: ‘We’re right and therefore everybody else is wrong,’” said John Green, a senior fellow with the Pew Forum. “What we’ve found is that many Americans apparently don’t invoke the exclusivity clause.”

Researchers did not track which other faiths people think might lead to salvation, so a Protestant or Catholic might be thinking of, for example, fellow Christians like the Eastern Orthodox, or non-Christians like Jews or Muslims. Either way, respondents seemed more focused on pragmatism than conversion.

“While Americans may have firm religious commitments, they are unwilling to impose them on other people,” Green said. “It may be a kind of attitude that works very well on a practical level in a society that is as diverse religiously as the United States.”

One finding that didn’t surprise scholars is that while the Bible has long been known as America’s best-selling book, 45 percent of respondents said that they never or seldom read scripture.

Researchers found that about one in four evangelicals, and less than one-tenth of Catholics, said religious beliefs most influence their political thinking.

“I think it really underscores the sense that the issue with religion in America is not that Americans don’t believe in anything, it’s that they believe in everything,” said Michael Lindsay, a sociologist at Rice University in Houston. “Religion is 3,000 miles wide, but it’s only three inches deep.” *-Religion News Service*