

**Students/readers: If you are/were a member of a religious congregation, a member of a religion without regularly gathering congregations, and in all honesty you are “deeply ignorant about religion,” what has brought you to this point? Does your religion require understanding of its basic beliefs and practices? When you participated in various rituals, were the meanings of the rituals explained carefully so that you understood what you were doing and why? Were the basic teachings and practices of other religions ever included in your education within your religion or in school? How important is a basic understanding of religion or religions to you; please justify/explain your comment on this matter. Finally, comment on Dr. Marty’s essay (the second item below).**

## **ON BASIC RELIGION TEST, MANY DO NOT PASS**

By Laurie Goodstein    September 28, 2010    *New York Times*

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

**Researchers from the independent Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life phoned more than 3,400 Americans and asked them 32 questions about [the Bible](#), Christianity and other world religions, famous religious figures and the constitutional principles governing religion in public life.**

**On average, people who took the [survey](#) answered half the questions incorrectly, and many flubbed even questions about their own faith.**

**Those who scored the highest were [atheists](#) and agnostics, as well as two religious minorities: Jews and Mormons. The results were the same even after the researchers controlled for factors like age and racial differences.**

**“Even after all these other factors, including education, are taken into account, atheists and agnostics, Jews and Mormons still outperform all the other religious groups in our survey,” said Greg Smith, a senior researcher at Pew.**

**That finding might surprise some, but not Dave Silverman, president of American Atheists, an advocacy group for nonbelievers that was founded by [Madalyn Murray O’Hair](#).**

**“I have heard many times that atheists know more about religion than religious people,” Mr. Silverman said. “Atheism is an effect of that knowledge, not a lack of knowledge. I gave a Bible to my daughter. That’s how you make atheists.”**

**Among the topics covered in the survey were: Where was Jesus born? What is Ramadan? Whose writings inspired the Protestant Reformation? Which Biblical figure led the exodus from Egypt? What religion is the [Dalai Lama](#)? Joseph Smith? Mother Theresa? In most cases, the format was multiple choice.**

**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.**

**One finding that may grab the attention of policy makers is that most Americans wrongly believe that anything having to do with religion is prohibited in public schools.**

**An overwhelming 89 percent of respondents, asked whether public school teachers are permitted to lead a class in prayer, correctly answered no.**

**But fewer than one of four knew that a public school teacher is permitted “to read from the Bible as an example of literature.” And only about one third knew that a public school teacher is permitted to offer a class comparing the world’s religions.**

**The survey’s authors concluded that there was “widespread confusion” about “the line between teaching and preaching.”**

**Mr. Smith said the survey appeared to be the first comprehensive effort at assessing the basic religious knowledge of Americans, so it is impossible to tell whether they are more or less informed than in the past.**

**The phone interviews were conducted in English and Spanish in May and June. There were not enough Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu respondents to say how those groups ranked.**

**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.**

**The question about Maimonides was the one that the fewest people answered correctly. But 51 percent knew that Joseph Smith was Mormon, and 82 percent knew that Mother Theresa was Roman Catholic.**

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**RELIGIOUS ILLITERACY - NEW AND NOT SO NEW by Martin E. Marty 4 Oct 2010**

**The recent Pew Forum report on religious literacy, or the lack of it, in the United States contains some new and some not-so-new trends, says Martin E. Marty. Above all, it is a wake-up call for those who value belief seeking understanding.**

**The least surprising surprise — but the most commented-upon — in the 'US Religious Knowledge Survey' issued by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life recently, was the one picked up at once by Laurie Goodstein in The New York Times.**

**As polls showed that there was not much 'Religious Knowledge' on hand, she stressed, “Those who scored the highest were atheists and agnostics, as well as two religious minorities: Jews and Mormons.”**

Why was anyone surprised? Those who grow up in a faith-community take their religion for granted; its stories and teachings are like the wall-paper in their mental furnished apartments. Those rejecting such spiritual housing tend to take regular looks back to see what they rejected, or need information for debating points should they challenge the half-faithful.

The Pew poll-takers wisely drew on the knowledge of Stephen Prothero, whose book *Religious Literacy* showed that religious illiteracy has had a long run in religious America.

Should we be so deeply shocked at this new Pew set of findings? Hardly. In 1955 Will Herberg's *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, the most quoted account of religion in our most religiously-touted modern decade, produced data that anticipates and parallels the new findings.

I recently had occasion to revisit a book from that era by (my then PhD co-advisor) Daniel J. Boorstin, later Librarian of Congress. His *The Genius of American Politics* came out when we were trying to make sense of the religious scene in the Eisenhower years, Herberg's prime.

At chapter length he noticed that "Perhaps never before in history has a people talked so much and said so little about its basic beliefs." He gave many illustrations of practices in the then-as-now Overclothed Public Square.

The US Supreme Court rulings against school prayer and devotional Bible reading had not yet come down, but never mind, when religious propagation and worship was still allowed and sometimes practised in public schools and other such institutions, 'we' were illiterate. There was no golden age, no time of 'good old days.'

Exceptions showed up then as now. What did help inform the literate minority? The informed learned in institutions — church, parochial school, Sunday school, and, most importantly, homes — which taught and nurtured a then-less-distracted minority of children and citizens in general. Some of these survive, get revitalised, and run against the trends.

Back then, we surmise, most citizens knew even less than they do now about other religions than their own or others to be found in the American majority. But even their own faiths, rich in stories, teachings, doctrines, and ethical injunctions, were, and often are, taken for granted.

The 'enemies' of American religion, at least in matters of knowledge, are not agnosticism or atheism but indifference, 'coasting', taking the drama of faith(s) for granted.

The leaders of religious institutions who care — parents, professors, ethicists — and who contend that the expression of faith cannot well be confined to personal experience, individual 'contentless spirituality' have their work cut out for them.

The new Pew survey could be a wake-up call — or the occasion for multitudes to push the 'snooze' button once again.

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(c) Martin E. Marty The author is a leading US commentator on religion - and the Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago. His biography, current projects, upcoming events, publications, and contact information can be found at [www.illuminos.com](http://www.illuminos.com) [1].

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