

Study sees link between education and views of heaven

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(RNS) The old wisdom: The more educated you are, the less likely you will be religious. But a new study says education doesn't drive people away from God -- it gives them a more liberal attitude about who's going to heaven.

Each year of education ups the odds by 15 percent that people will say there's "truth in more than one religion," says University of Nebraska-Lincoln professor Philip Schwadel in an article for the Review of Religious Research. Schwadel, an associate professor of sociology, looked at 1,800 U.S. adults' reported religious beliefs and practices and their education.

People change their perspective because, as people move through high school and college, they acquire an ever-wider range of friendships, including people with different beliefs than their own, Schwadel says.

"People don't want to say their friends are going to hell," he says.

For each additional year of education beyond seventh grade, Americans are:

-- 15 percent more likely to have attended religious services in the past week.

-- 14 percent more likely to say they believe in a "higher power" than in a personal God. "More than 90 percent believe in some sort of divinity," Schwadel says.

-- 13 percent more likely to switch to a mainline Protestant denomination that is "less strict, less likely to impose rules of behavior on your daily life" than their childhood religion.

-- 13 percent less likely to say the Bible is the "actual word of God." The educated, like most folks in general, tend to say the Bible is the "inspired word" of God, Schwadel says.

Hemant Mehta, the Friendly Atheist blogger at Patheos.com, is skeptical, saying this "raises an eyebrow at everything I've always heard that the more educated you are, the less religious you are. But it must depend on how you define religion."

Schwadel's findings dovetail with findings by Barry Kosmin of Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., a co-author of the American Religious Identification Survey statistics on religious beliefs and the behavior of people with master's degrees, doctorates and professional degrees.

It turns out that on Sunday mornings, "the educated elite look a lot like the rest of America," Kosmin says -- just as likely to believe in a personal God or higher power.