

The indifferent majority

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

September 29, 2010



Yesterday the Pew Forum released the results of a [survey about general religious knowledge](#) in the U.S. The numbers aren't all that impressive—the average respondent got half of the 32 questions right, all multiple-choice questions on the level of "Which religion aims at nirvana?" and "Where was Jesus born?" Only eight people (out of 3,000+) got all 32 right, and six got them all wrong.

What's lighting up the blogosphere, however, is the relative religious literacy among groups: atheists and agnostics (a single group in the poll's findings) and Jews had the best scores, while Christians had the worst—despite the high number of questions in the "Bible and Christianity" category. Controlling for education (atheists/agnostics and Jews tend to have more of it) and other demographics reduces the gap but doesn't eliminate it. What's going on?

"I have heard many times that atheists know more about religion than religious people," American Atheists president Dave Silverman [told Laurie Goodstein](#). "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." [CCblogger](#) Gawain de Leeuw [echoes](#) this knowledge-makes-atheists point and wonders whether clergy "are afraid of teaching too much."

Of course, atheists/agnostics and Jews didn't actually do better on the Christianity questions than Christians did, just nearly as well—and considerably better on all the others. This is perfectly intuitive: minority groups know more about the majority than vice versa, because majority culture tends to define what counts as general knowledge. So most Jews know where Jesus was born, even though few Christians know much about Buddhism. Jesus makes the cover of one general-interest magazine or another ever month or so, and it only takes a couple shopping trips between Thanksgiving and New Year's to accidentally memorize the words to "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

The real shame here isn't that non-Christians know our tradition almost as well as we do. It's that we know so little about others. "Only about a quarter of Americans know that [most] Indonesians are Muslim," [notes Adam Serwer](#), "which I guess makes sense since we haven't bombed or invaded them yet." It's become clearer than ever in the last several weeks that Christians' general ignorance of minority faiths—to say nothing of our lack of [actual relationships](#) across faith lines—is a pressing problem in American life.

A [15-question quiz](#) version of the survey is posted at Pew's site. Feel free to post your score as a comment on this post.