

## Massive study finds most Americans devout, tolerant

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By Michael Paulson, Globe Staff

The United States is a nation of believers: Most Americans say they believe in God, they pray, and they attend worship services regularly; they also believe in angels and demons, in heaven and hell, and in miracles.

But they also say, contradicting the teachings of many faiths, that truth comes in many forms. Large majorities of Americans say that many religions - - not just their own -- can lead to eternal life, and that there is more than one way to interpret religious teachings.

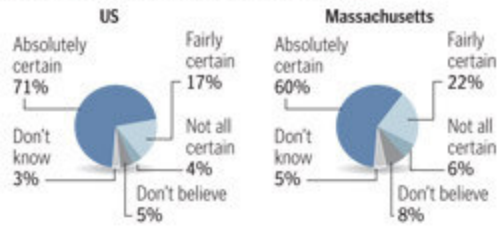
In other words, Americans are devout, but not dogmatic, according to a massive new study of religion in America conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life and released today.

"Even though the country is highly religious, in terms of the importance of religion in their lives, the regularity of church attendance, etc., most Americans are, in fact, not dogmatic about their faith," said Luis Lugo, director of the Pew Forum. "They're very open. In terms of various paths to heaven, and even in terms of interpreting the teachings of their own faith, the majority tell us that there's not just one right way to do that."

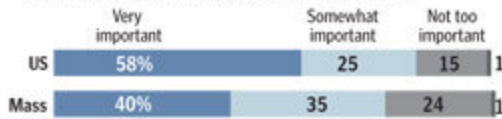
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### SURVEY RESULTS

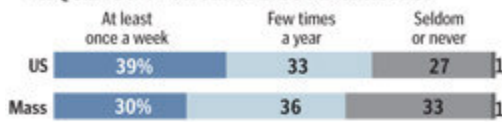
**BELIEF IN GOD OR UNIVERSAL SPIRIT**



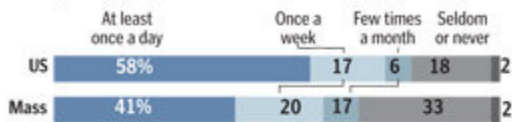
**IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION IN ONE'S LIFE**



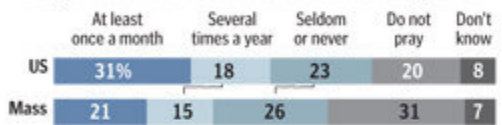
**FREQUENCY OF ATTENDANCE AT SERVICES**



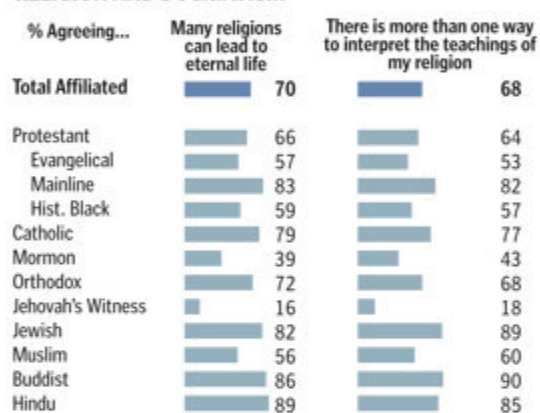
**FREQUENCY OF PRAYER**



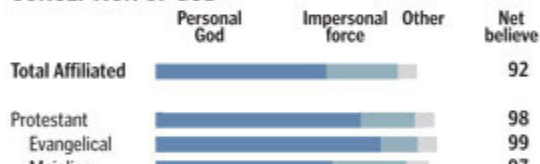
**FREQUENCY OF ANSWERS TO PRAYER REQUEST**



**RELIGION AND DOGMATISM**



**CONCEPTION OF GOD**



The study sheds light on regional differences in religious beliefs and practices, and finds that New Englanders are the least likely to say they are religious. Massachusetts lags behind the nation -- often near the bottom of all states -- in the percentage of its residents who say they are certain that God exists, that they believe the word of God is literally true, that religion is very important in their lives, or that they attend worship weekly or pray daily.

The data confirm a fact known widely by scholars of religion in public life: The more often people attend worship, the more likely they are to be politically conservative. Mormons and evangelical Protestants are the most likely to be doctrinally orthodox and politically conservative, while Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and atheists are more liberal in both their theology and their politics, the study finds.

Religious practice appears to have more of an impact on some political beliefs than others. The study finds that the most intensely religious Americans are more likely to oppose abortion and homosexuality. But, the study finds, religious practice seems to have less impact on Americans' attitudes toward the environment, foreign affairs, and economic policy.

The study of Americans' religious beliefs and practices is the second analysis of an unusually detailed

study of faith in America, a Pew poll of a representative sample of 35,000 Americans interviewed by telephone last year. The first report, released in February, examined the religious affiliation of Americans, and found a remarkable degree of fluidity, in which 44 percent of Americans have switched faiths or denominations, and that Protestants, who founded the nation, are poised to become a minority here.

Scholars are already zeroing in on the study's new findings about the openness of Americans to multiple paths to salvation and multiple interpretations of religious teachings. The study found that 70 percent of Americans -- even 57 percent of evangelical Protestants -- believe that many religions can lead to eternal life, while 68 percent of Americans say there is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of their religions.

"The interesting thing is that this is a very religious society, compared to Europe, but nevertheless it's a very tolerant society," said Peter Berger, the director of the Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs at Boston University. "In Europe, you'd get the tolerance of indifference. But that's not the case in America, where people can be very religious and yet be tolerant, including evangelicals, who are often regarded as intolerant or fanatical, but are not -- at least most of them -- and most of us find this cheering news."

Another scholar, Rice University sociologist D. Michael Lindsay, said the theological flexibility of Americans is a result of the diversification of the country through immigration.

"It's the result of a push toward diversity and religious tolerance since 1965," said Lindsay, who is the assistant director of the Center on Race, Religion and Urban Life at Rice. "As Americans rub shoulders with people of other religious traditions, they are less judgmental, and less likely to offer pronouncements about other people's eternal life."

The most striking exceptions are Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses; a majority of whom do not believe that other religions can lead to eternal life or that there is more than one way to interpret teachings.

But the flexibility of most Americans toward church teachings is likely to trouble many church leaders. Many Christian churches, for example, teach that Jesus is the only way to salvation; the Southern Baptist Convention, which is the nation's largest Protestant denomination, declares that "there is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord." And many churches assert their authority to interpret religious teachings; the Catholic Church, for example, says in its catechism that the task of interpreting the Bible "is ultimately subject to the

judgment of the Church."

"While one applauds what could be thought of as an openness to other religions, one has to wonder if this is essentially bland secularism -- all religions are constructed by humans and therefore equally true or untrue among religionists who don't understand their own faith," said Todd M. Johnson, director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. "I think leaders of religious communities will look at this finding and ask how they can more effectively educate their communities, both about their own faith and that of others."

The poll, like many others, finds Americans claiming to be deeply faithful -- 92 percent say they believe in God. But conceptions of God vary -- 60 percent, including most Christians, say they believe God is a person, while 25 percent, including pluralities of Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus, believe God is an impersonal force.

The poll also finds a considerable amount of variation among religious traditions. Most evangelicals, black Protestants, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses say they attend religious services at least once a week; most mainline Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus do not. Overall, 39 percent of Americans say they attend worship services at least once a week -- a finding consistent with that of other survey research, and one that social scientists say is probably an overestimate because people tend to exaggerate their degree of church attendance when talking to pollsters.

On abortion, the most frequent churchgoers are the most likely to support a ban on most abortion procedures. Although the Catholic Church ardently opposes abortion, the poll finds Catholics almost evenly split on the issue, with 48 percent saying abortion should be legal in most cases, and 45 percent saying it should be illegal. Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and evangelical Protestants are the most likely to say abortion should be illegal, while Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Orthodox Christians, mainline Protestants, and the unaffiliated are the most likely to say abortion should be legal.

On gay rights, Buddhists, Jews, Catholics and mainline Protestants are the most likely to say homosexuality should be accepted, while Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Muslims, and evangelical Protestants are the most likely to say homosexuality should be discouraged. Overall, 50 percent of Americans said homosexuality should be accepted by society, while 40 percent said it should be discouraged.

For Catholics, a heavily studied group, the poll contains little dramatic news

according to Mark Gray, a research associate at the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University. But Gray said he was struck by a finding that suggests that Catholics are less likely than Protestants to send their children to religious education programs, which he called "disconcerting," and a surprise given the Catholic Church's historic emphasis on religious education for children.

But the study contains more news about minority faiths, whose population in the United States is generally too low to be accurately depicted in smaller studies. The Pew study, for example, found that 62 percent of American Buddhists believe in nirvana, which the pollsters defined as "the ultimate state transcending pain and desire, in which individual consciousness ends," while 61 percent of Hindus in the United States believe in reincarnation.

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