A large wooden cross is positioned on the right side of the cover, extending from the bottom towards the top. The background is a bright blue sky filled with soft, white, wispy clouds. The text is centered and overlaid on the sky.

Religious Literacy in the United States

Research Presented
by
Dr. Ray Reynolds

Religious Literacy in the United States (by Dr. Ray Reynolds)

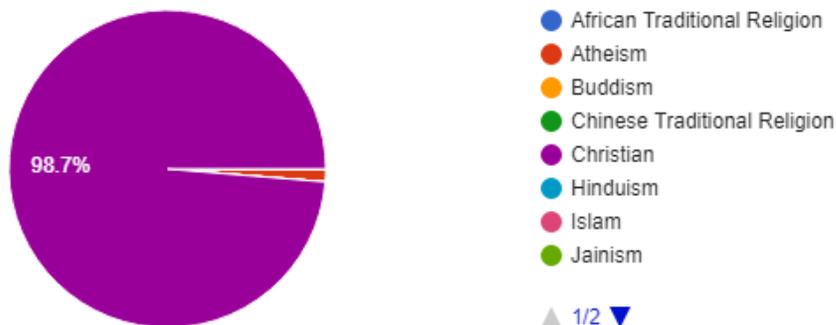
The assignment is to write a briefing paper to help with policymakers and practitioners working in government and civil society who frequently utilize documents in their work. I chose to submit a document that reviews the poor religious literacy in the United States, based on my own research. I hope that this information will be a blessing to researchers, scholars and practitioners. I also hope it will be made available for critical analysis to a wider audience in the future.

This paper is intended for teachers, pastors, and those who instruct young people. It was my observation that young people today have little knowledge about the religious foundation of our country, the influence of religion on the world stage, and the impact of religion on current events. My original research began in 2015 with a survey given during a youth rally in Orange Beach, Alabama. The event, called GULF, involves several hundred teenagers each year (<http://www.gulfyouthexperience.com/>). I sat up a booth and conducted a short survey for 100 teenagers. The questions ranged from the age of the earth, the preference of religion, and the creation vs. evolution debate in the classroom. I found that there was a disconnect between the Bible and what was being taught in school and at home.

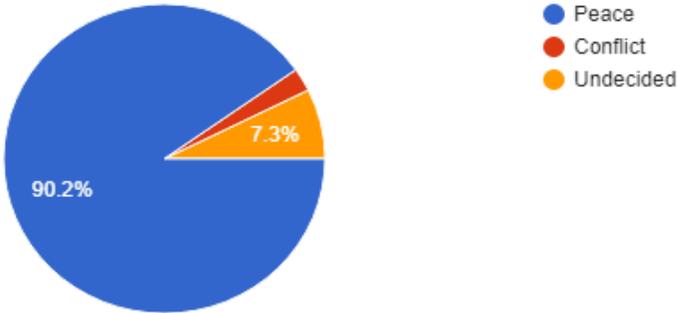
After enrolling in multiple courses at Groningen, Cambridge, and Harvard Divinity, I began researching religious literacy (January 2018) and have compiled my research here in this briefing paper in order to encourage better communication between about what is being taught and what is being retained by students. What I have found is that there is a diversity of views and a confusion of facts by many surveyed. It is my opinion that the research will prove that past and present events, which often impact policies or political views, are based almost exclusively on emotion and not on truth.

I created some Google Forms and placed the links on various sites including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and the blackboards for Groningen, Cambridge, and Harvard Divinity. The research presented below is still ongoing, but with over 100 participants here are the results:

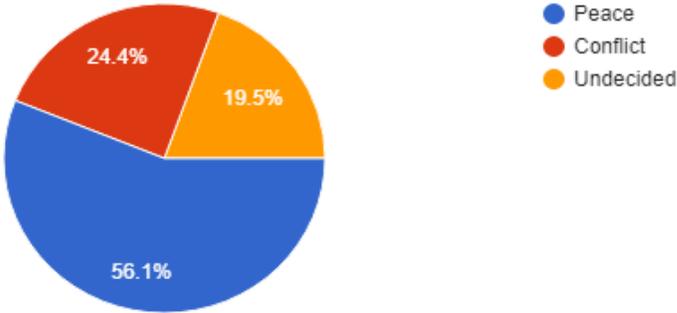
What is your religious affiliation?



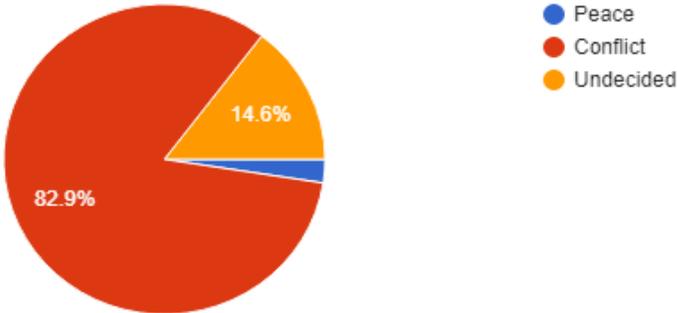
When you think of Christianity, do you think of it as a religion of peace or conflict?



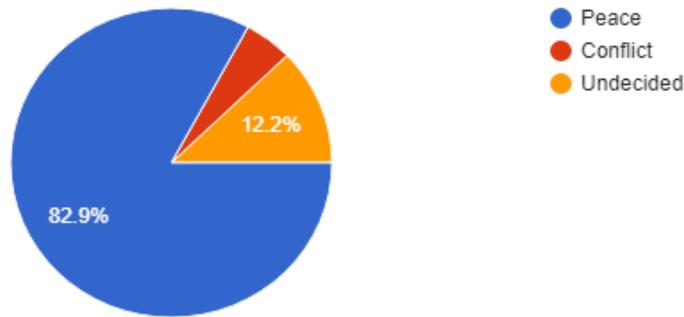
When you think of Judaism, do you think of it as a religion of peace or conflict?



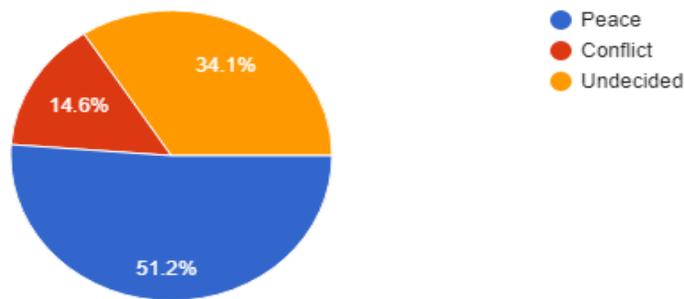
When you think of Islam, do you think of it as a religion of peace or conflict?



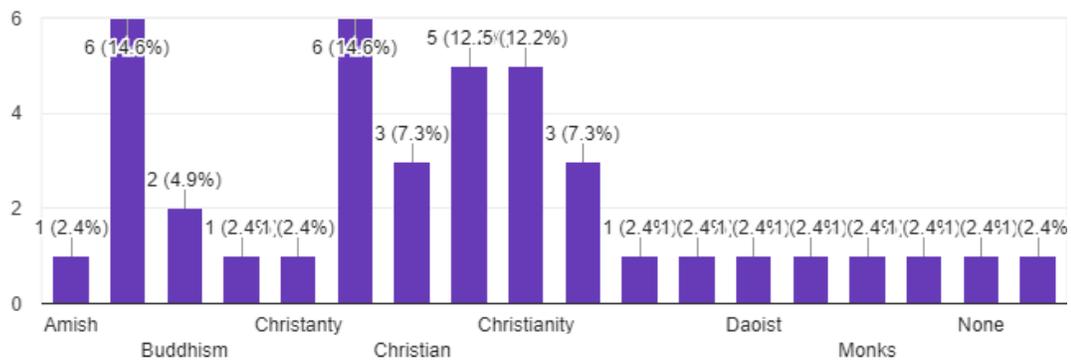
When you think of Buddhism, do you think of it as a religion of peace or conflict?



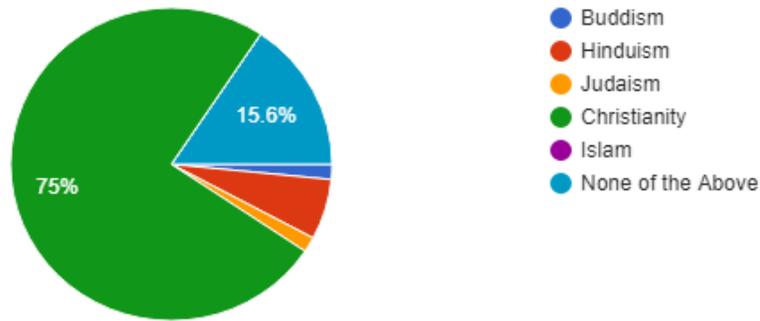
When you think of Hinduism, do you think of it as a religion of peace or conflict?



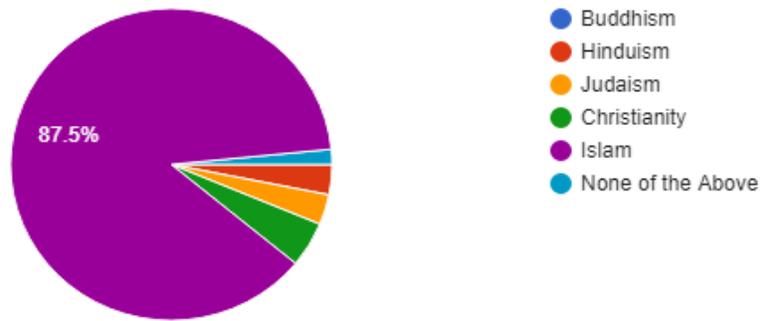
If you had to choose one religion, based on your experience, which religious group is the most peaceful?



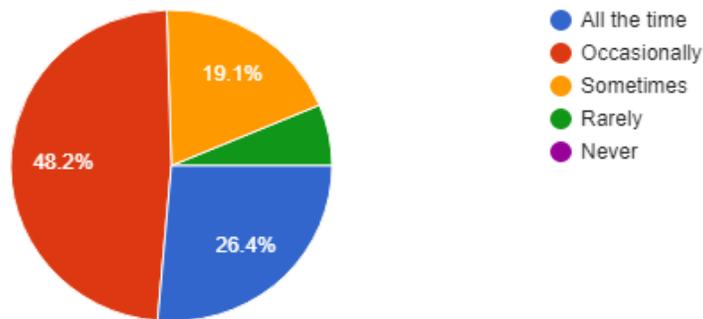
In your opinion, which religion (of those listed below) has done the most to exalt the role of women?



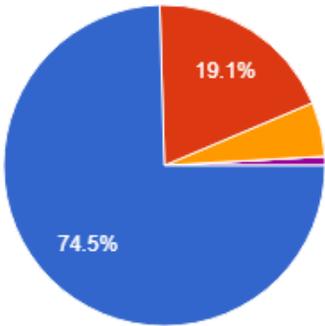
In your opinion, which religion (of those listed below) has suppressed the role of women the most?



How frequently do you talk to your friends about religion?

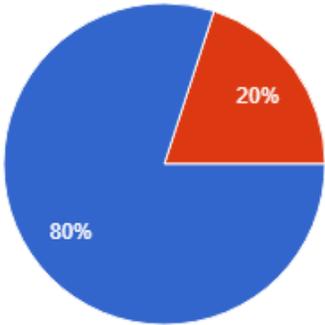


Which of the following answers best represents your feelings on religious discussions with your friends?



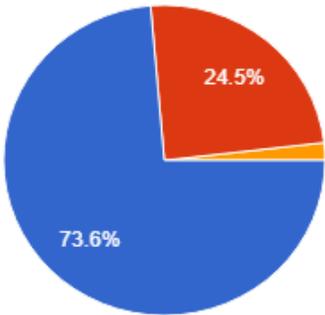
- Nothing is off limits. We openly discuss religion often.
- We talk about it, but we avoid deep religious conversations.
- We usually avoid those discussions, but it's not off limits.
- We haven't really talked about religion and don't care about it.
- We have no interest in religious discussions, unless we are making f...

Do you and your best friend share the same religion?



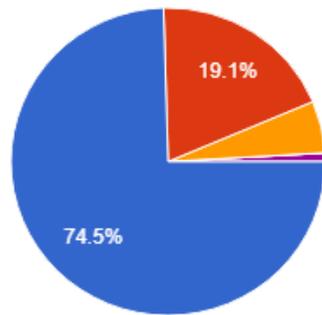
- YES
- NO

Do you and your friends attend religious functions together?



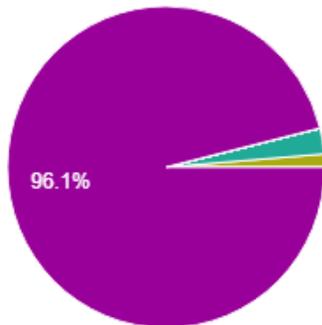
- Yes
- No, but we MIGHT attend together
- NO and we wouldn't attend together

Which of the following answers best represents your feelings on religious discussions with your friends?



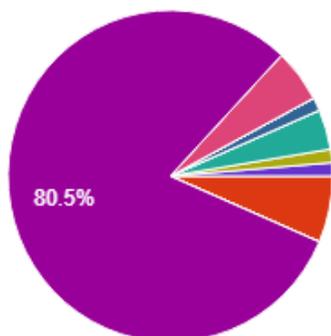
- Nothing is off limits. We openly discuss religion often.
- We talk about it, but we avoid deep religious conversations.
- We usually avoid those discussions, but it's not off limits.
- We haven't really talked about religion and don't care about it.
- We have no interest in religious discussions, unless we are making f...

Which religion do you think was most prominent in America in the 1700-1800s when American was first founded?



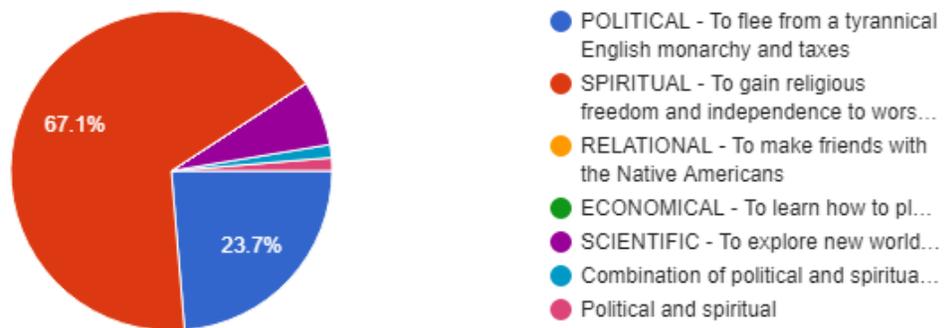
- African Traditional Religion
 - Atheism
 - Buddhism
 - Chinese Traditional Religion
 - Christian
 - Hinduism
 - Islam
 - Jainism
- ▲ 1/2 ▼

Which religion do you think is most prominent in America today?



- African Traditional Religion
 - Atheism
 - Buddhism
 - Chinese Traditional Religion
 - Christian
 - Hinduism
 - Islam
 - Jainism
- ▲ 1/2 ▼

Why do you think the original settlers (pilgrims) decided to settle the new world (America)?



There is no doubt that the research I conducted leans toward a Christian perspective. However, it is also easy to see that those surveyed have no consensus on which religions, besides Islam, also have issues with conflict. In further research I should ask questions to make sure that they reflect one's knowledge about certain religions. For instance, how many of those surveyed actually know the tenants of Buddhism and Hinduism? How much instruction have they received from education, houses of worship, or at home? Has the media influenced their view of conflict in certain religions? As for the suppression of women, have they seen this firsthand or are they getting their opinions based on secondhand information.

The research shows that not all those surveyed are influenced by their peers. Many of them do not hold to the same religious views. Many do not frequently talk about religious subjects with their peers. And, maybe the most interesting to me, they are unclear as to which religion is the most prominent in their community or in the United States. This shows a religious literacy gap.

As for the history of the United States, those surveyed seemed unsure as to why the "pilgrims" came to the United States. This may be the result of secularized teaching in public schools or a general ignorance on the subject. Some answered that they simply wanted to "boldly go where no one had gone before." This statement is not visible in the Mayflower Compact, but in the opening credits of Star Trek. The familiarity of the statement may have thrown the respondents off the scent of the truth or they may have selected it for a humorous take on the question. No follow up was given to these respondents.

Many of the questions on the survey were mandatory, but others were not required. When given the opportunity to respond under "other," or with a further explanation, few took the opportunity. The most respondents were on the questions regarding relationships, friendship, and religious conflict. I had originally thought that the most likely answers would come from the questions regarding the religious persuasion of most people in America, however, that was the least interesting to the respondents. This reveals that the questionnaire was more successful with subjective questions rather than objective ones.

After a complete analysis of the research, here are my conclusions:

- Google forms can be a terrific aid for gathering and sharing data with others.
- There are advantages to peer polling if the questions are short and simple.
- There are advantages to peer polling if the questions are complicated or unclear.
- One should not expect detailed analysis on religious subjects from each respondent.
- Questions are answered more frequently when using subjective questions.
- People are willing to discuss religious literacy in the United States.
- People need to be more educated in the areas of religious literacy.

As for cautionary notes, I would like to add that there are other sources available for this research.

Specifically we can consider PEW research, Barna, and other groups that have done similar surveys on a larger scale. This was something that I chose to do on my own and it has allowed me to openly discuss these topics with other people. I have been able to identify sensitive aspects of religion, certain topics and issues that affect my peers.

This research will be ongoing throughout 2018. If you would like more information please do not hesitate to contact me at reynolds@hcu.edu or look me up on Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook. Thank you for your consideration.

**This research was presented to the University of Groningen for the course entitled “Religion and Conflict” and was shared with the University of Cambridge. It was also presented to Harvard Divinity School to coincide with the courses on “Religion, Peace, and Conflict” and “Religious Literacy: Traditions and Scriptures.” It has been submitted for review at the Harvard Religious Literacy Summer Institute for Educators which will be July 30–August 3, 2018 in Cambridge, MA.*