

Pew Survey Reflects Biblical and Religious Illiteracy

By Bob Young¹

Citizens of the U.S. are generally a religious people, but they are also deeply ignorant about religion. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life asked more than 3400 people 32 questions about the Bible, Christianity and other world religions, and religious history and geography. Those who scored the highest were atheists and agnostics, Jews, and Mormons. These groups did better than evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, and Catholics. Overall, survey respondents answered only half of the questions correctly, and many missed questions about their own faith. Of 12 questions about the Bible and Christianity, the groups that answered the most right were Mormons (7.9) and evangelical Protestants (7.3). On questions about world religions, like Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism, the groups that did the best were atheists, agnostics and Jews.²

One especially interesting finding is that most Americans wrongly believe that anything having to do with religion is prohibited in public schools.

- 89% of respondents, when asked whether public school teachers are permitted to lead a class in prayer, correctly answered no.
- Less than one of four knew that a public school teacher is permitted “to read from the Bible as an example of literature”, despite the Supreme Court ruling that the Bible may be taught for its “literary and historic” qualities as long as it is part of a secular curriculum.
- Only about one third knew that a public school teacher is permitted to offer a class comparing the world’s religions.
- The survey report concluded that there was “widespread confusion” about “the line between teaching and preaching.”

Church leaders who are concerned that their members know little about the essentials of their own faith will be concerned by some of the 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.

¹ Information compiled from the Pew Survey, a New York Times report, and a summary which appeared in *Pastor's Weekly Briefing*.

² For more details, go to the Pew Forum at www.pewforum.org. Average number of questions answered correctly out of 32: atheists/agnostics (20.9); Jewish (20.5); Mormon (20.3); evangelical Protestant (17.6); all Protestants (16.0); mainline Protestant (15.8); all Catholics (14.7).