

Religion and national belonging: Do you have to be Christian to be “one of us?”

*Is religion seen as core to national identity? Here Pew Research Center’s **Bruce Stokes** discusses the findings from Pew’s recent survey on public attitudes to religion and national belonging in the US, Europe, Canada and Australia. Whilst sizable segments of the public see religion as core to national belonging, language and customs matter more.*




Image: Flickr, concep007

The tide of **people moving across the world**, be they immigrants or refugees, has sparked concern about national identity in **Europe** and the **United States**. The ethnic, linguistic, cultural background of migrants has triggered intense debates over the benefits and the costs of growing **diversity** and deepened the question of who is “one of us?”

The religious affiliation of immigrants and refugees has become particularly contentious, with anti-Muslim sentiment **strong** among some Europeans, many of whom doubt Muslim migrants wish to assimilate into European society.

In 2016, the Pew Research Center took a closer look at public attitudes toward religion and national belonging in the United States, Europe, Canada and Australia. In our **survey** we asked people whether being Christian or Catholic (reflecting religious traditions in the countries polled) was important to national identity. A median of just 15% across the 13 countries surveyed said it is **very** important to be Christian in order to be a true national – significantly fewer than the proportion who pointed to shared language or customs. But behind the median finding, the survey revealed stark cross-national differences in how people view the relationship between religion and national belonging.

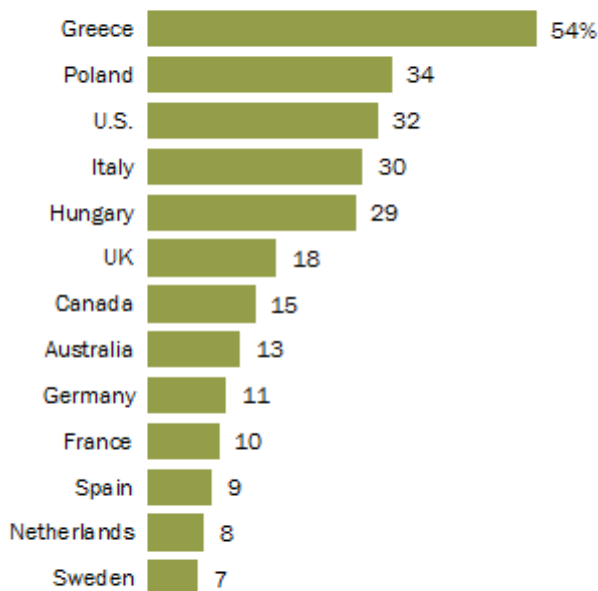
Religion and the sense of being ‘truly American’

In 2014, Christians accounted for **70.6%** of the U.S. population. Non-Christians and those unaffiliated with any religion totaled 28.7%. 

About a third (32%) of Americans say it is very important for a person to be a Christian in order to be considered truly American. Roughly three-in-ten (31%) contend that one's religion is not at all important.

Relatively few say religion essential to national identity

Being a Christian is very important for being truly (survey country nationality)*



* In Italy, Poland and Spain, asked "Catholic." Question not asked in Japan.

Source: Spring 2016 Global Attitudes Survey. Q85c.

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The link between religion and nationality is of greatest consequence to those for whom religion plays a very important role in daily life. Among this group, 51% say it is very important to be Christian in order to be truly American. For those respondents who say religion for them is only somewhat important, not too important or not important at all, just 11% say Christian identity is very important to being American.

There are also denominational differences on the issue of Christianity and nationality. A majority (57%) of white evangelical Protestants say it is very important to be Christian to be a true American. Just 29% of white mainline Protestants and 27% of Catholics agree. Only 9% of people who are unaffiliated with an organized religion say it is very important for a person to be Christian in order to be truly American.

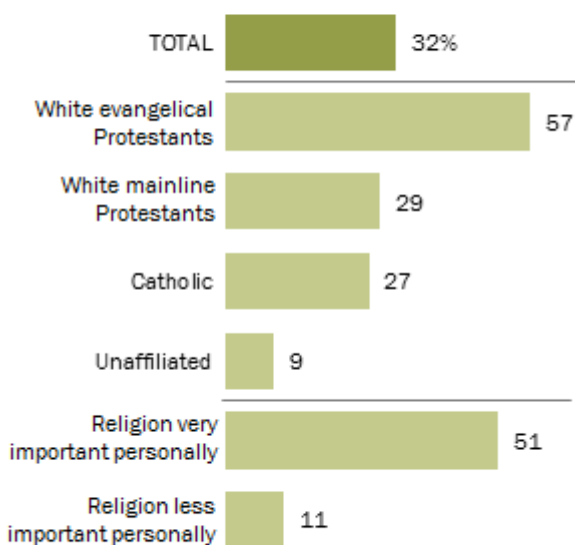
A clear partisan split exists on the importance of being Christian in order to be a true American. More than four-in-ten (43%) Republicans say it is very important. Only 29% of Democrats believe Christian faith is similarly very important to national identity. And just 26% of Independents go along with that view.

Generations are divided on the link between religion and national identity: with those 50 and older placing far greater importance on being a Christian (44% say it is very important) than Americans under 35 (18%).



Most white evangelical Protestants say it is very important to be Christian to be truly American

Being a Christian is very important for being truly American



Source: Spring 2016 Global Attitudes Survey. Q85c.

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Older people more likely to see link between Christianity and nationality

Being a Christian is very important for being truly (survey country nationality)*

	18-34	35-49	50+	Oldest - youngest gap
	%	%	%	
Greece	39	49	65	+26
UK	7	12	26	+19
Canada	6	8	25	+19
Germany	0	10	16	+16
Hungary	20	28	35	+15
Italy	26	19	40	+14
Australia	8	6	20	+12
Netherlands	2	4	13	+11
Poland	29	33	39	+10
Sweden	2	5	10	+8
Spain	7	6	13	+6
France	10	6	12	+2

* In Italy, Poland and Spain, asked “Catholic.”

Note: Statistically significant differences in **bold**.

Source: Spring 2016 Global Attitudes Survey. Q85c.

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Men and women differ slightly on religion’s importance in American identity. More than a third (36%) of women say it is very important for a person to be a Christian; roughly a quarter (27%) of men concur.

Views on Christianity and nationality also differ along educational lines. People with a high school education or less (44%) are more than twice as likely as people with at least a college degree (19%) to voice the view that it is very important that one is Christian in order to be American.

Religion and national identity in Europe, Canada and Australia

In Europe, there are widely disparate views on the importance of religion to national identity. In Greece, 54% believe it is very important to be Christian to be considered a true national. In contrast, in two countries – Spain (57%) and Sweden (57%) – majorities hold the opposite view, that religion is *not at all* important to national identity.

Within countries, views on the link between religion to nationality often divide along generational lines. Across the European countries surveyed, people ages 50 and older are significantly more likely than those ages 18 to 34 to say that being Christian is very important to national identity. This generation gap is largest in Greece: 65% of older Greeks say it is very important but only 39% of younger Greeks agree. The generational differential is 18 percentage points in the UK, 16 points in Germany and 15 points in Hungary.

Europeans on the right of the ideological spectrum are also more likely to view religion as very important to nationality. This right-left divide is particularly prominent in Greece (26 percentage points) and Poland (21 points). The ideological left is quite secular in Germany (just 5% say religion is very important to nationality) and Spain (6%). By comparison, a larger share of people on the left in Greece (40%), Hungary (26%), Italy (24%) and Poland (21%) say being Christian is very important to being “one of us.”

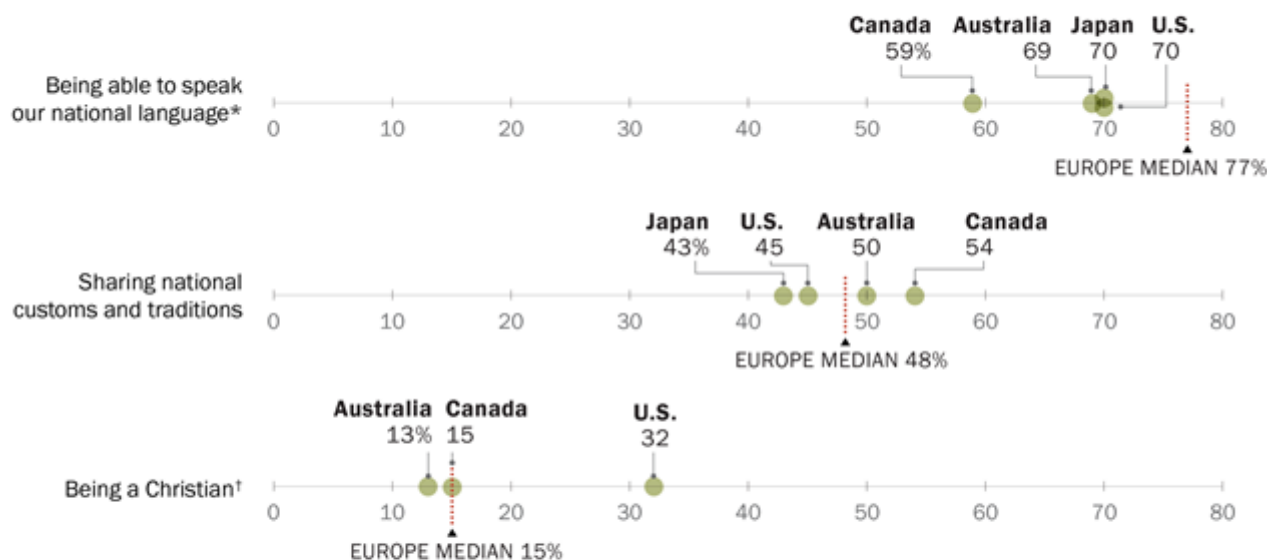


In Australia, only 13% of Australians believe that it is very important for a person to be a Christian in order to be truly Australian. Roughly half (48%) think it is not important at all. Australians who put themselves on the right of the political spectrum (19%) are nearly five times as likely as those on the left (4%) to place great importance on religious belief as a qualification for being a true Australian. In addition, older Australians (20%) are more than twice as likely as the younger generation (8%) to link Christianity with national identity. Less educated Australians (19%) are also more likely than those with more education (9%) to make this connection.

Just 15% of Canadians think being Christian is very important to national identity. People ages 50 and older (25%) are roughly four times as likely as Canadians ages 18 to 34 (6%) to think that being Canadian is dependent upon being a Christian. Similarly, about four times as many people on the right (21%) as on the left (5%) think being Christian is very important to being Canadian. And Canadians with a secondary education or less (22%) are twice as likely as those with more than a secondary education (10%) to link religion with national identity.

Wide agreement that language is at the core of national identity

___ is very important for being truly (survey country nationality)



* In Canada, national language asked as "either English or French."

† In Italy, Poland and Spain asked "Catholic." Not asked in Japan.

Note: European median based on 10 countries.

Source: Spring 2016 Global Attitudes Survey, Q85b-d.

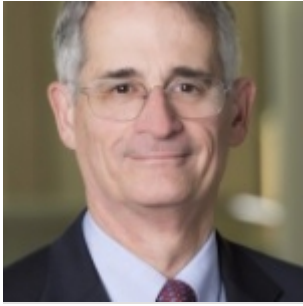
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In the ongoing debates over immigration, cultural diversity and national identity, public opinion surveys provide useful insights. In a number of Western countries, sizable segments of the public see religion as core to national belonging. But overall, it is far from the only, or most critical, litmus test of national identity. In our surveys, people place a greater emphasis on being able to speak the local language and adopting local customs and traditions. For most, immigrants do not have to be Christian to be accepted. If newcomers learn to communicate in the local tongue and adopt local culture, a far less intrusive demand than changing one's religion, most people say they will accept immigrants as truly "one of us".

About the author

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