

# Faith Digest

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**Religious freedom panel gets reprieve.** With a last-minute vote, Congress saved an independent religious freedom watchdog commission that was about to shut down. The bill reauthorizing the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) for three years was held up in the Senate almost three months before passing with an amendment that will limit the appointment of commissioners to a maximum of two, two-year terms. The House approved it Dec. 16, the same day the commission was set to close. USCIRF is a bipartisan commission that issues an annual report of "countries of particular concern" on religious rights abuses and provides foreign policy recommendations to the president, Congress and the State Department. It has nine commissioners, a staff of 17 and a \$4 million annual budget.

**U.S. tops charity index.** Are Americans the most generous people in the world? Yes, according to a new study of global giving to charity. The ["World Giving Index,"](#) based on 150,000 interviews with citizens of 153 nations, ranks the U.S. highest on a scale that weighed monetary donations, volunteer work and willingness to help a stranger. The survey's authors noted charitable behavior is not correlated with wealth. Of the 20 countries the World Bank ranks richest by gross domestic product, only five made it into the top 20 of the index.

**Atheists distrusted by society.** A new study finds atheists among society's most distrusted group. Psychologists at the University of British Columbia and the University of Oregon say their study, published in the current issue of *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, demonstrates anti-atheist sentiment stems from moral distrust, not dislike, of nonbelievers. The study, conducted among 350 American adults and 420 Canadian college students, asked participants to decide if a fictional driver

damaged a parked car and left the scene, then found a wallet and took the money, was the driver more likely to be a teacher, an atheist teacher or a rapist teacher? The participants, who were from religious and nonreligious backgrounds, most often chose the atheist teacher.

**Believers can be swayed on nukes, environment.** Most Americans believers do not see preventing climate change or the spread of nuclear weapons as "spiritual obligations," according to a new poll. [The University of Maryland's Center for International and Security Studies](#) conducted the poll to examine how individuals think their faith intersects with global policy challenges. Just 39 percent of all believers, and 31 percent of evangelicals, agreed most scientists think the problem of climate change is urgent and enough is known to take action. Only 15 percent of all believers initially agreed it is a spiritual obligation to prevent climate change. But after being presented with pro and con statements about a spiritual obligation to be good stewards of the environment, 76 percent embraced this notion. Similarly, after being presented with pro and con arguments for eliminating all nuclear weapons in the world, 69 percent favored this goal, up from an initial 55 percent.