

Muslims surpass atheists as most unpopular group in U.S.

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Four out of 10 Americans disapprove of atheists, but an even greater number say the same thing about Muslims.

About 40 percent of Americans say atheists “do not at all agree” with their vision of America, according to a new study from sociologists at the University of Minnesota who compared Americans’ perceptions of minority faith and racial groups.

At the same time, Americans’ disapproval of Muslims jumped to 45.5 percent from just over 26 percent 10 years ago, the last time the question was asked.

And Nones—those who say they have no religious affiliation, but may also have spiritual or religious beliefs—also are unpopular. This is significant because Nones now make up one-third of the U.S. population.

The study found:

- Almost half of those surveyed—48.9 percent—said they would disapprove of their child marrying a Muslim, up from 33.5 percent in 2006.
- The spiritual-but-not-religious are mistrusted by 12 percent of Americans, while almost 40 percent of Americans say the rise of the Nones is “not a good thing.”
- Disapproval rates for several minority groups have grown—Jews, Latinos and Asian-Americans experienced 10-point jumps in disapproval, while recent immigrants, conservative Christians and African-Americans grew about 13 percent each.

The new study also attempts to find out why atheists are so distrusted by what its authors call “dominant group members”—religious Americans. The findings pinpoint three things—religious Americans associate atheists with “criminality,” materialism and “a lack of accountability.”

Complicated reasons behind anti-Muslim sentiment

The study’s authors—sociologists Penny Edgell, Douglas Hartmann, Evan Stewart and Joseph Gerteis—describe the jump in disapproval of Muslims as a major change and are focusing now on identifying reasons for it.

“Religion becomes a signal and a marker, an easy shorthand for Americans’ moral judgment,” Hartmann said. “But that is not the only thing going on with Muslims. It’s more complicated.”

But Hussein Rashid, an adjunct professor at Barnard College who frequently writes and consults about Islam in the U.S., said the jump in anti-Islamic sentiment the study pinpoints is reflected in the current political rhetoric.

“The data from this survey shows that there is an increasing pull away from the promise of America,” he said in an email. “In 10 years, people have a more negative perception of Muslims, Jews, gays, Latinos and blacks. As a new America is taking shape, with all its diversity, there is a reactionary response that wants a mythic America of everyone being exactly the same.”

Religious belief seen as measure of trustworthiness

The study has more bad news for atheists. Despite a decade of organized effort from groups such as American Atheists, the Secular Coalition for America, and Openly Secular to normalize nonbelief, Americans are not buying it. Religious belief remains a measure of trustworthiness and belonging, the study found.

“Overall, we find no support for the idea that the increasing visibility of nonreligious persons, groups and movements in American life has reduced anti-atheist sentiment in any significant way,” the study’s authors write.

A small bit of good news for nonbelievers: The number of people who say they would disapprove of their child marrying an atheist has dropped slightly, to 44 percent, down from 48 percent in 2006.

The study was written from data collected in 2014 from 2,500 participants. It was published in the current issue of Social Forces journal. The previous study was published in 2006 by three of the same authors.