

# Survey finds religion a big deal in Mississippi, not so much in Vermont

February 20, 2009

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Want to be almost certain you'll have religious neighbors? Move to Mississippi.

Prefer the least religious state? Venture to Vermont.

A recent [Gallup Poll](#), based on more than 350,000 interviews, finds the Magnolia State is the one where the most people—85 percent—say “yes” when asked “Is religion an important part of your daily life?”

Less than half of Vermonters, meanwhile—42 percent—answered that same question in the affirmative.

The importance of religion in people's lives varies from state to state.

Joining Mississippi in the top “most religious” states are other notches in the Bible Belt—Alabama at 82 percent, South Carolina at 80 percent, Tennessee at 79 percent and Louisiana and Arkansas, both at 78 percent.

Others at the top of the religiosity ranking included Georgia and North Carolina at 76 percent and Oklahoma at 75 percent. Texas and Kentucky tied at 74 percent.

New England predominates in the top “least religious” states. Following Vermont are New Hampshire at 46 percent, Maine and Massachusetts at 48 percent, Alaska at 51 percent and Washington at 52 percent.

“Clearly, states in the South in particular, but also some states in the Southwest and Rocky Mountains ... have very religious residents, and New England states in particular, coupled with states like Alaska and others, are irreligious,” said Frank Newport, editor-in-chief of The Gallup Poll.

The reasons, however, are far less clear, observers said.

For example, some might attribute the religiosity of Mississippi to the high percentage of African-Americans—long known for being comparatively highly religious—who live there.

“Mississippi is still No. 1, even if we look only at whites,” said Newport. “Whites in Mississippi are also very religious.”

Overall, Gallup researchers found 65 percent of all Americans said religion was important in their daily lives.

The total sample of 355,334 U.S. adults, including respondents with land-line telephones and cellular phones, had a margin of error of plus or minus 1 percentage point. Some states had margins of error as high as plus or minus 4 percentage points.

Newport was surprised one 65 percent of all Americans said state—Utah—did not make the “most religion was important in their daily religious” list, given the state’s large lives. Mormon population.

“They apparently have two kinds of people in the state,” he said. “They have the very religious and devout Mormon population, but it also looks like they have a lot of nonreligious people.”

Mark Silk, director of the [Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life](#), said Gallup’s findings reflect research conclusions from the upcoming American Religious Identification Survey, which he is working on

with other scholars.

“New England is now slightly ahead of the Pacific Northwest in terms of the high rate of unchurched people,” said Silk, co-author of *One Nation, Divisible: How Regional Religious Differences Shape American Politics*.

Although evangelicalism may be making some inroads in Western states like Washington and Oregon, he attributes the predominance of New England states in the “least religious” category more to other demographic trends in the Northeast.

“What we are finding ... is a considerable drop in New England in the Catholic population,” said Silk, whose center is based in Hartford, Conn.

And it’s a matter of them moving away from the church, he said, not the region.

“Catholics are holding their own nationwide because of Latino immigration but, relatively speaking, there’s little of that in New England,” he observed.