

# Two-thirds of Americans say Osama bin Laden is in hell

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—While Americans have debated whether Osama bin Laden’s body belongs at the bottom of the Arabian Sea, most agree on the final destination of his soul—in hell.

A new poll reports most Americans (82 percent) believe bin Laden distorted the teachings of Islam to suit his own purposes, and nearly two-thirds (65 percent) agree he will be “eternally punished for his sins in hell.”

Americans react to hearing about  
Osama Bin Laden's death.

Evangelical Christians, at 80 percent, are most convinced bin Laden will spend eternity in hell, according to the poll conducted by [Public Religion Research Institute](#) in partnership with Religion News Service a few days after the al-Qaida founder was shot by U.S. troops in Pakistan.

In contrast, only about two-thirds of Catholics, white mainline Protestants and minority Christians—and less than half the religiously unaffiliated—agree that bin Laden’s in hell.

The poll didn’t yield representative samples of Muslims or other minority faiths.

Stephen Prothero, a Boston University religion professor and author of *God Is Not One*, said the numbers struck him as low, particularly among evangelicals. But the “eternally” part of the question may have prompted hesitation among some respondents, he said, compounded by questions about hell raised by megachurch pastor Rob Bell’s recent book, *Love Wins*.

Americans are more conflicted over whether Christian values are consistent with the raucous celebrations that broke out after bin Laden was killed. About 60 percent of respondents—ranging from seven in 10 minority Christians to just over half of white mainline Protestants—believe the Bible’s message, “Do not rejoice when your enemies fall,” applies to the death of bin Laden.



Ray Maldonado of Paterson, N.J., marks the death of al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden at Ground Zero in New York. (RNS PHOTO/John Munson/The Star-Ledger)

[Clark West](#), an Episcopal chaplain at Cornell University, said the Bible sends mixed messages on such celebrations—examples of rejoicing over an enemy’s downfall, as well as the admonition from Proverbs.

“Scriptures can be found both supporting and critiquing such

celebrations,” he said. “There can be healing for a trauma survivor in recovering a joyful sense that evil will not have the last word, but human events like the killing of bin Laden should not be confused with the divine vanquishing of evil.”

But for 9/11 survivors and victims’ families, “quiet prayer and attentiveness,” rather than raucous celebration, may provide a greater sense of healing, he said.

In other findings:

- A slim majority (53 percent) of Americans say the United States should follow the Golden Rule and not use any methods on our enemies that we would not want used on our own soldiers—down from 2008, when 62 percent agreed.

Support for the Golden Rule principle was strongest among minority Christians, Catholics and religiously unaffiliated Americans (all with majorities above 52 percent), but less so among evangelicals (47 percent) and mainline Protestants (42 percent).

- Younger Americans between the ages of 18 and 34 (69 percent) are more likely to believe the Bible passage about not celebrating “when your enemies fall” applies to bin Laden than do those age 65 and older (47 percent).

- Religiously unaffiliated Americans (57 percent) are significantly more likely than Christians to say the use of torture against suspected terrorists can never be justified. Catholics, at 53 percent, are the Christian group most likely to say torture can never be justified.

- Majorities of white evangelicals (54 percent) and minority Christians (51 percent) believe God had a hand in locating bin Laden, compared to only a third of white mainline Protestants and 42 percent of Catholics.

- A slim majority (51 percent) of Americans believe God has granted America a special role in human history, led by two-thirds of evangelicals and nearly as many (63 percent) minority Christians, compared to 51 percent of Catholics and white mainline Protestants.

Prothero said he was most surprised by the Golden Rule responses, which indicate half the country is willing to disregard Christianity's most commonly expressed teaching—at least, when it comes to wartime.

“There is this sense that America is supposed to be a Christian nation ... but that tends to be more of a slogan than a reality,” he said. “Are you willing to think about the Bible when it comes to torture and terrorism and bin Laden, or are you just throwing biblical principles out the window and going with your gut and your anger and your revenge?”

But even if Americans seem conflicted on this fundamental Christian teaching, the widespread agreement across religious and political lines that bin Laden “distorted the teachings of Islam” indicates a growing knowledge about Islam, he said.

“There’s an awareness out there about the distinction between Islam and Islamic extremism,” Prothero said. “It’s an important conversation that we’ve having right now.”

The PRRI/RNS Religion News Poll was based on telephone interviews of 1,007 U.S. adults between May 5 and 8. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.