

Commentary: Does education ‘cure’ people of faith?

November 14, 2022

(RNS)—It’s been 30 years since *The Washington Post* published an article on Christian televangelists, describing their followers as “largely poor, uneducated and easy to command.”

[The pushback was immediate and overwhelming](#), as thousands flooded the *Post*’s telephone switchboard, and letters poured in to its editors after Pat Robertson—a Yale Law School alum himself—read the offending passage on his television show, “The 700 Club.”

It was a watershed in journalism that awoke many mainstream outlets to the reality of evangelicals’ demographics and power.

Yet the bias that says churches, mosques and synagogues are filled with people who have a low level of education persists. The common assumption is a formal education, particularly a college degree, is antithetical to religious belonging.

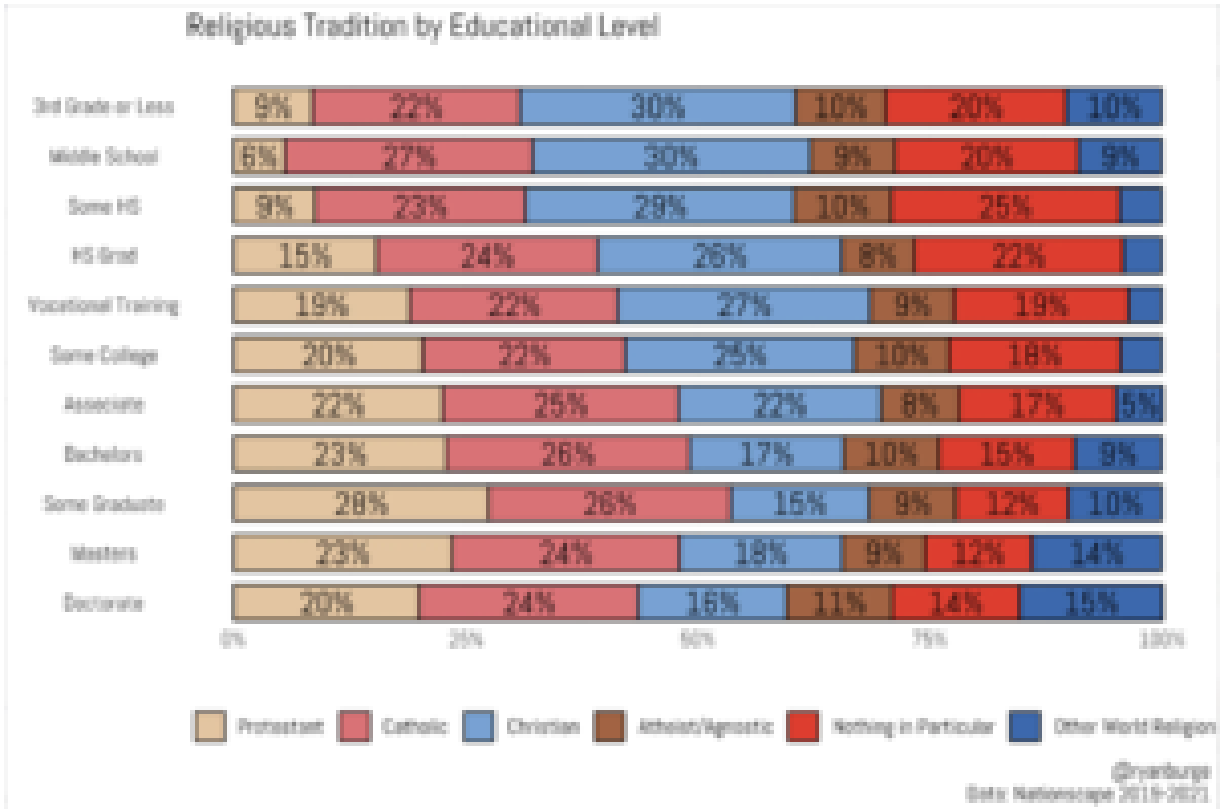


Chart by Ryan Burge.

What the data says

Even a cursory look at recent data reveals just the opposite is true: Those who are the most likely to be religiously unaffiliated are those with the lowest levels of formal education. The group most likely to align with a faith tradition? Those who have earned a college degree or more.

The Cooperative Election Study, one of the largest publicly available surveys in the United States, began in 2008. In all 14 years since, those Americans who attained no more than a high school diploma have been more likely to report no religious affiliation than college graduates.

In 2020, 38 percent of those who did not finish high school described their religion as atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular. For those who had completed some graduate school, just 32 percent said they were among

those unaffiliated with any religious community, a group known as the “nones.”

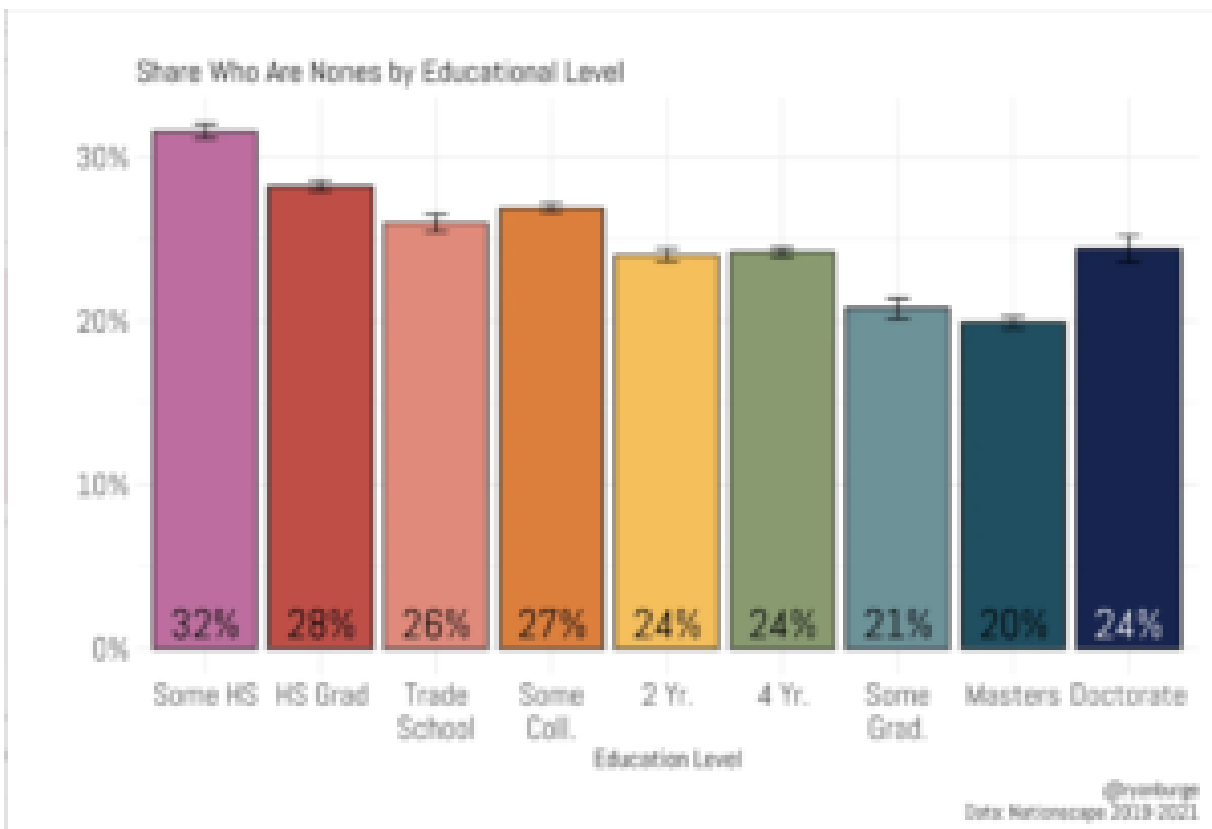


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This same finding holds true in larger and more granular data sets. The Nationscape survey has a total sample of more than 475,000 respondents and contains large numbers of individuals at every level of education, including nearly 9,000 respondents with a doctoral degree.

Being a none correlates most closely, at 32 percent, with those who have not completed high school. About a quarter of people with a high school diploma or four years of college are nones, and among those with master’s degrees, only a fifth say they have no religious affiliation.

When the distribution of religious traditions is visualized by educational level, this relationship between these two factors becomes clearer. The

share of respondents who identify as Christians—Protestant, Catholic or Just Christians—continues to rise, from 61 percent for those with the lowest levels of education to 69 percent of those who have taken some graduate courses.

It's also noteworthy that the share of atheists and agnostics does not rise with educational levels, either. It's 8 percent of those with a high school diploma and 9 percent of those with a master's degree.

The nature of belief

The relationship between educational attainment and religiosity takes a turn, however, when people are asked about the nature of their beliefs. Religion is not just a matter of identifying with a religious tradition, after all. It often involves an actual psychological belief in a higher power.

The [General Social Survey](#) asks individuals what they believe about God, offering a range of options, from "I don't believe in God" to "I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it."

Among people with no more than a high school degree, 56 percent indicated they were certain about their belief in God, while 7 percent said they didn't believe in God at all. Those who hold graduate degrees were certain about their belief in God at a much lower rate of 38 percent. The share who didn't believe in God at all was 10 percent.

Certainty about the existence of a higher power seems to wobble a bit, then, with higher educational attainment, despite an increased likelihood of being connected to a religious tradition.

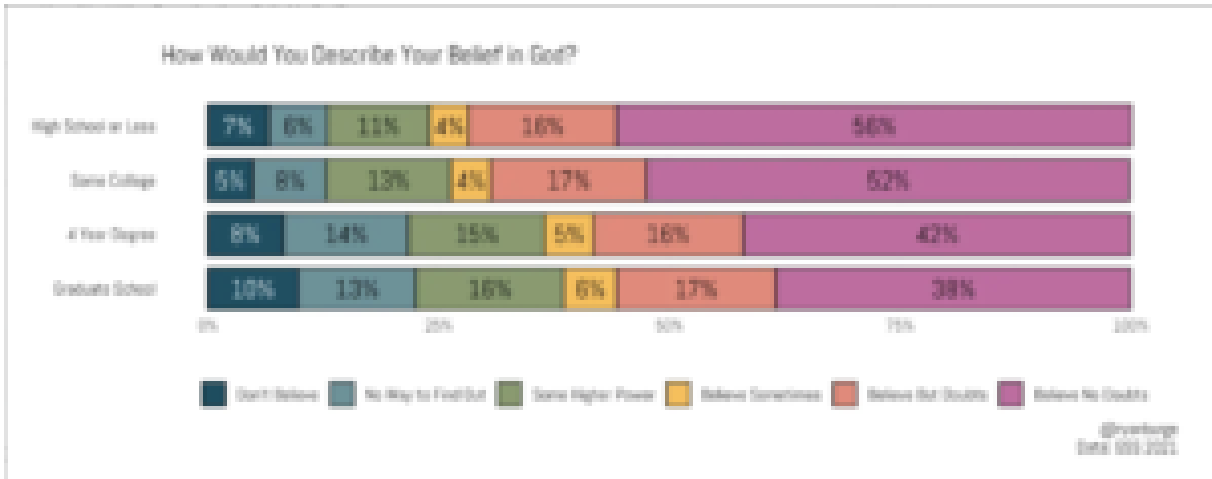


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That finding was replicated in [a recent study](#) published in the American Sociological Review that concluded education does seem to move individuals away from moral absolutism to moral relativism. This effect is stronger among those who major in the humanities, the arts, the social sciences or related fields.

This evidence seems to say educated Americans are drawn to the communal aspects religion provides, but may be more ready to question what's coming from the pulpit. It's not a surprising result, perhaps, given higher education encourages discussion and debate—and perhaps, too, the urge to belong.

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