

# BUILDING AN INTERRELIGIOUS SOCIETY

A strategic framework for the future of ICJS



INSTITUTE FOR  
ISLAMIC · CHRISTIAN · JEWISH  
STUDIES

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Religious difference is integral to life in the United States. Our country was founded upon the promise of religious liberty for all and the possibility of diverse religious communities building a shared future. To build a society that gives to religious bigotry no sanction and to religious persecution no assistance,<sup>1</sup> toleration of religious difference has never been enough. Rather, we must work with one another to realize the promise and the possibility of an interreligious society.

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**To envision an interreligious society requires hope. ICJS holds this hope.**

We must envision a society in which dialogue replaces division, friendship overcomes fear, and education eradicates ignorance. We must imagine a place where interreligious encounters regularly occur—forged in a shared pursuit of understanding—resulting in creative collaborations and life-giving connections.

To hope is not to be naïve about what divides us; to hope is not to ignore the complicity of our religious traditions in the hurt and harms of both past and present. To hope for an interreligious society, we must engage in the sacred work of doing justice: naming truths, righting wrongs, seeking forgiveness, and doing better. To hope is hard work. At ICJS, we have faith that people will do the work needed to get us to this envisioned interreligious society. ►

<sup>1</sup> Paraphrased from 1790 exchange between George Washington and Moses Seixas (Hebrew Congregation of Newport, RI): <https://www.tourosynagogue.org/history-learning/gw-letter>

### **To build an interreligious society requires ambition. ICJS has this ambition.**

Religious bias and bigotry harm the fabric of society. In dark hours, the promise and possibility of a multireligious, multiracial United States may seem out of reach. Polarization threatens our capacity to understand one another, let alone work together. Religious “othering” is at the root of hate crimes, policies of exclusion, and deep divisions in our communities. We must dismantle bias and bigotry so that we can build a society in which the promise and possibility of pluralism is realized.

We need to be champions for religious pluralism. Interreligious spaces do not often occur without intention; they need to be built. At ICJS, we create learning spaces where productive discomfort stretches us toward mutual discovery. We need a bigger vision of life together—an ambitious vision of an interreligious society.

### **ICJS developed a strategic framework for envisioning and building this interreligious society.**

In 2020, ICJS began planning for our organizational future—one that would move us toward this envisioned interreligious society. The ICJS Strategic Framework—adopted by the Board of Trustees in March 2021, and outlined in the following pages—is a living document that will guide the vision, mission, and future work of ICJS for years to come. We invite you to join us in dismantling religious bias and bigotry and building an interreligious society.

### **Vision**

An interreligious society  
in which dialogue replaces division,  
friendship overcomes fear,  
and education eradicates ignorance.

### **Mission**

To dismantle religious bias and bigotry,  
ICJS builds learning communities  
where religious difference becomes  
a powerful force for good.

### Increase interreligious literacy

Equip our learning communities with knowledge about the religious traditions, teachings, practices, and history of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam for **interreligious** understanding and dialogue.

What do you know  
about religion?  
Not enough.

- Expand educational programs that promote understanding of one's own religious tradition and sacred texts, other religious traditions and sacred texts, and the history and practices of religious bigotry (e.g., Islamophobia and Antisemitism) that continue to permeate religious communities and society
- Effectively reach into community sectors (e.g., education, nonprofit, congregations) using the Fellowship model
- Create and promote the ICJS Speakers Bureau
- Use multiplatform publishing and promotion to expand the reach of ICJS content and writing

#### ► DEFINITION

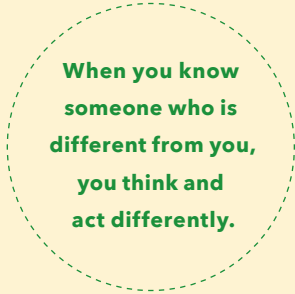
##### **INTERRELIGIOUS**

Of, occurring between, or existing between people of differing religious traditions (including none at all)

*(adapted from Merriam-Webster)*

## Build resilient interreligious networks

Facilitate strong relationships among people with diverse religious and **nonreligious** identities who work against religious bias and bigotry and work together for the common good.



When you know someone who is different from you, you think and act differently.

- 
- Develop networks within community sectors (e.g., education, nonprofit, congregational) for ongoing interreligious partnerships and relationships
  - Cultivate strategic partnerships with secular, religious, and interreligious institutions
  - Train a diverse pipeline of interreligious leaders

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### ► DEFINITION

#### **THE NONRELIGIOUS OR "NONES"**

People who chooses not to affiliate with any particular religious tradition; these are people who check "none of the above" when asked on a survey, "What is your religious identity?"

### Advance the academic field of Interreligious and Interfaith Studies

Be a leader in academic **discourse** and publishing on core concepts and principles in this emerging field.

Interreligious  
thinking is vital;  
Big Ideas matter.

- 
- Establish the Silber-Obrecht Endowed Lectureship as the premier lecture in the field of Interreligious and Interfaith Studies
  - Equip faculty from diverse institutions (e.g., colleges, universities, seminaries) to develop interreligious literacy in their courses and seminars
  - Convene conferences and forums that advance the field of Interreligious and Interfaith Studies
  - Support and promote the interreligious research, writing, and expertise of ICJS staff
  - Provide service to the field of Interreligious and Interfaith Studies (e.g. chair committees, participate on panels, contribute to journals, support and lead professional societies)

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#### ► DEFINITION

##### DISCOURSE

(1) Verbal interchange of ideas especially: conversation;

(2) formal and orderly and usually extended expression of thought on a subject;

(3) a mode of organizing knowledge, ideas, or experience that is rooted in language and its concrete contexts, such as history or institutions

*(adapted from Merriam-Webster)*



## Inspire the public to champion religious pluralism

Act as a thought leader to help the American public value religious difference.

Religion is a public conversation, but who is speaking?  
Let's be a voice.

- 
- Provide insight on interreligious issues through commentaries in local and national press
  - Repurpose ICJS scholarly work for use in news and commentary outlets
  - Create and promote an active ICJS Speakers Bureau

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### ► DEFINITION

#### **PLURALISM**

An ethic for living together in a diverse society: not mere tolerance or relativism, but the real encounter of commitments.

*(from The Pluralism Project at Harvard University)*

### Foster a culture of **equity** and inclusion for our interreligious work

Build and increase trust, support, and involvement of those marginalized in interreligious spaces so that everyone is included in our work.

We want everyone  
at the table,  
so let's build a  
bigger table.

- Recognizing where ICJS has an opportunity for growth and improvement, build and develop ICJS relationships with Muslims, people of color, and women
- Encourage diverse voices at ICJS (as program presenters, program participants, trustees, staff, and vendors)
- Ensure diverse voices and perspectives are represented in ICJS resources and materials
- Prioritize recruitment of Fellowship cohorts that reflect the broader community within which we live

#### ► WHAT DOES EQUITY MEAN FOR ICJS?

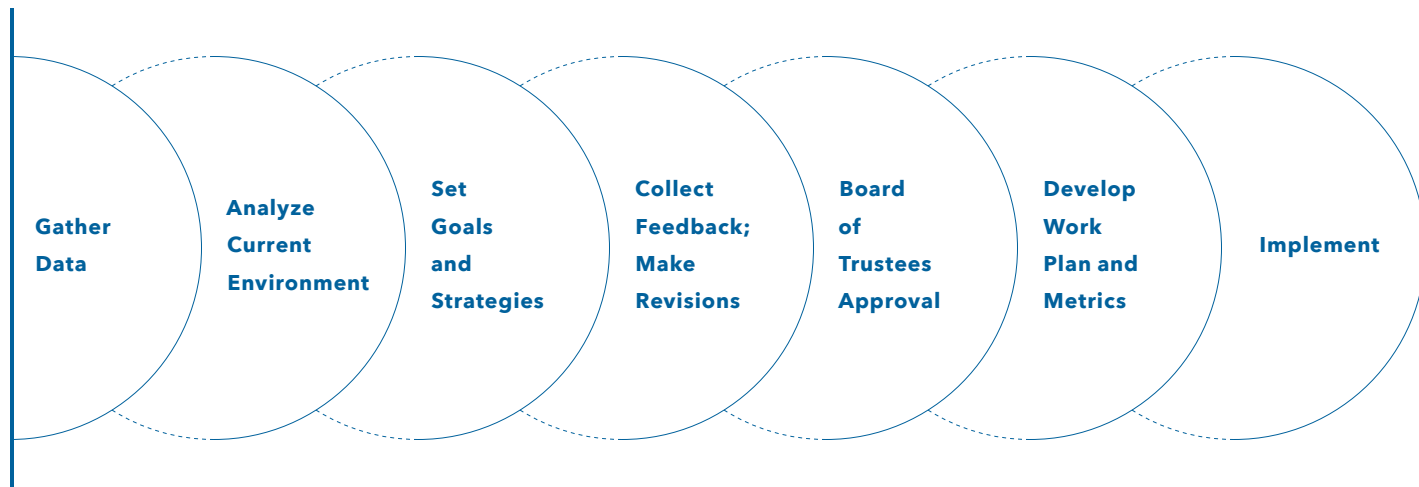
We engage religious difference in a society marred by inequities rooted in race, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, abilities, socioeconomic status, and other differences. These inequities should have no influence on how we value each other. However, our religious traditions continue to be complicit in the perpetuation of these inequities, and interreligious dialogue

often reflects them. We refuse to privilege any individual's or community's perspective or to interpret their experiences for them. We commit to fostering a culture of equity and inclusion in interreligious conversations.

*(From ICJS Statement of Values, adopted May 2020)*

## Planning Process

From June 2020 to March 2021, the ICJS Strategic Planning Committee, composed of Trustees and staff members, led the organization in creating a Strategic Framework to bring clarity and consensus to the work of ICJS. Facilitated by the Quinn Strategy Group, the committee conducted the following steps.



### **Context: The U.S. Religious Landscape**

Whether you are a devout religious practitioner, or identify as not religious at all, there can be no mistaking the powerful force diverse religions play in the United States.

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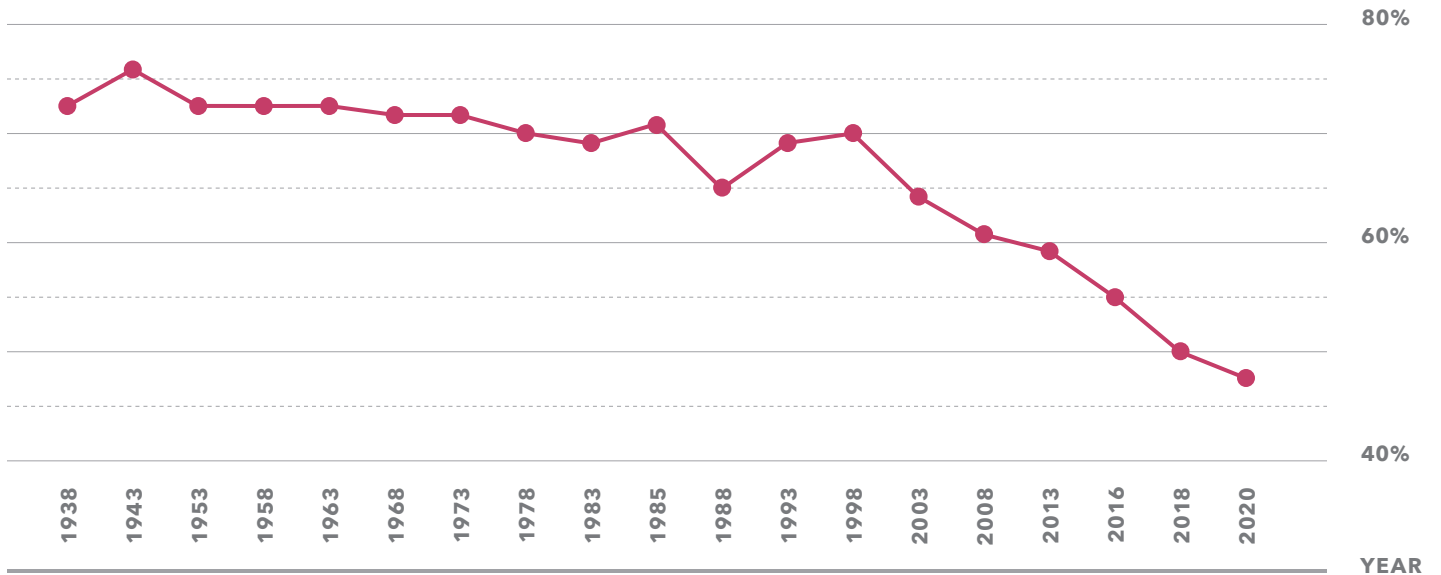
Religions shape every aspect of shared life and society—culturally, socially, politically, ethically, and personally. In order to achieve its mission, ICJS must be attuned to the dynamic, changing religious landscape in the United States. In the last 20 years, there have been dramatic shifts in the landscape that require our attention. As part of the strategic planning process, data about the current religious marketplace was considered in determining the future of ICJS. This appendix includes key data points relevant to the ICJS Strategic Framework.

**Congregational membership is dropping.**

**Therefore, ICJs must continue to expand its reach outside of religious institutions.**

In 2020, only 47 percent of u.s. adults said they are a member of a church, synagogue, or mosque, compared to approximately 70 percent throughout the 20th century.

► **CONGREGATIONAL MEMBERSHIP**



► **SOURCE**

Gallup ([news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx](https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx))

— % of u.s. adults who answer that they are a member of a church, synagogue, or mosque

**Religious leadership is becoming more diverse and is seeking new credentials.**

**Therefore, ICJS must think differently about religious leaders and where interreligious leadership may be found.**

The primary growth in U.S. seminaries comes from increased enrollment by Black, Hispanic, Asian, and other students. Growth in seminaries is most evident in programs that do not typically lead to ordination (non-M.Div. degrees). In 1999, 71 percent of students seeking master's degrees in theological schools were White, compared to 51 percent in 2019.

► **CHANGING RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP**

Decline in M.Div.  
White students

**-22%**

Growth in ministerial  
non-M.Div. White students

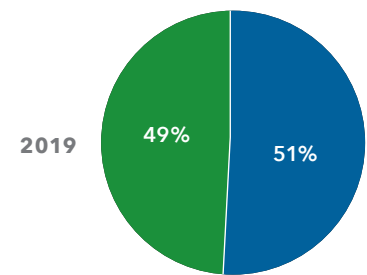
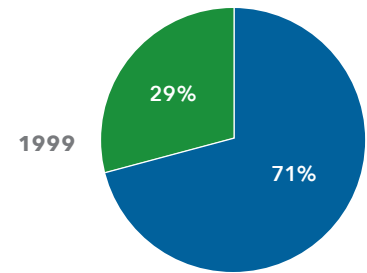
**16%**

**+66%**

Growth in M.Div.  
Black, Hispanic, Asian &  
other students

**182%**

Growth in ministerial non-M.Div.  
Black, Hispanic, Asian &  
other students



**Changes in racial composition of master's degree students in theological schools**

- Black, Hispanic, Asian & other
- White

► **SOURCE**

*In Trust* (data from Association of Theological Schools) ([intrust.org/Magazine/Issues/Autumn-2020/The-Census-Masters-Degree-Enrollment](http://intrust.org/Magazine/Issues/Autumn-2020/The-Census-Masters-Degree-Enrollment))

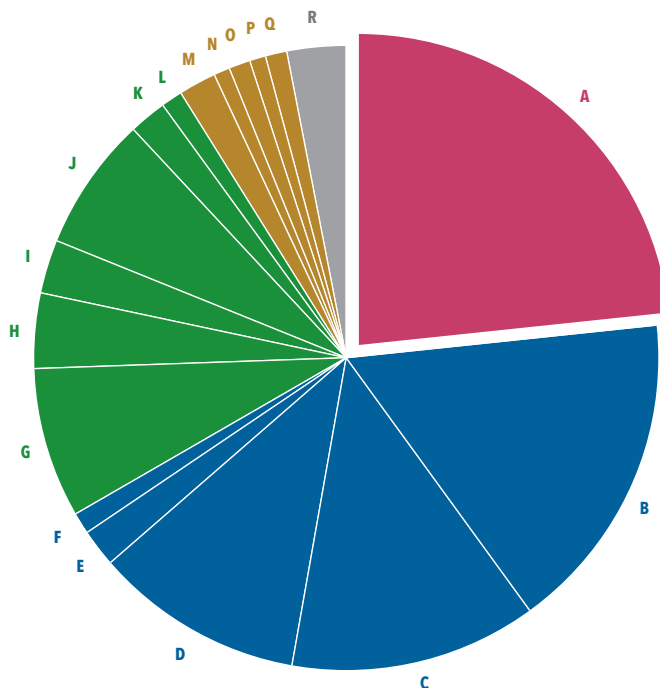
The percentage of people in the United States who identify with a religion is declining.

Therefore, ICJs must engage the religiously unaffiliated.

The religiously unaffiliated accounted for nearly one-quarter (24 percent) of the U.S. population. Since the early 1990s, this group has roughly tripled in size.

► U.S. RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE (2016)

- A 24% Unaffiliated
- B 17% White Evangelical Protestant
- C 13% White Mainline Protestant
- D 11% White Catholic
- E 2% Mormon
- F 1% Orthodox Christian
- G 8% Black Protestant
- H 4% Hispanic Protestant
- I 3% Other Nonwhite Protestant
- J 7% Hispanic Catholic
- K 2% Other Nonwhite Catholic
- L 1% Jehovah's Witness
- M 2% Jewish
- N 1% Muslim
- O 1% Buddhist
- P 1% Hindu
- Q 1% Other religion
- R 3% Don't know/Refused



► SOURCE

PRRI ([prri.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated](http://prri.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated))

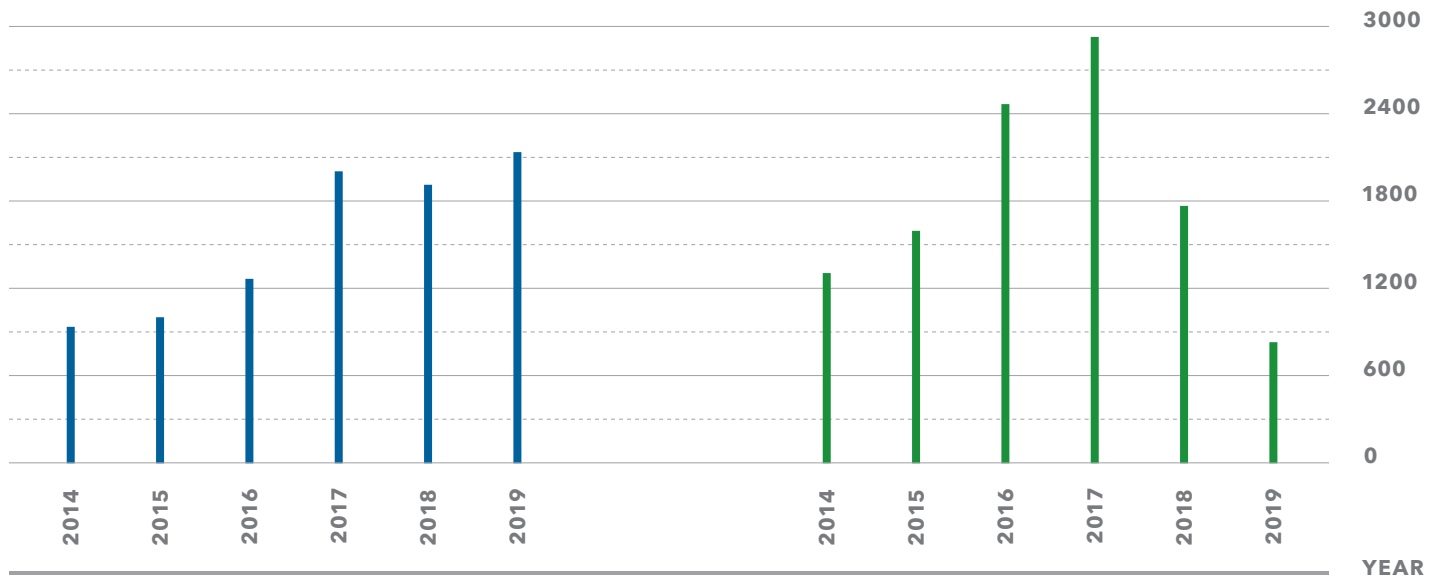
## APPENDIX B

**In recent years, there has been a resurgence in antisemitic and anti-Muslim incidents.**

**Therefore, ICJS' work to dismantle religious bias and bigotry remains vital.**

Both antisemitic and anti-Muslim incidents reported in the United States more than doubled from 2014 to 2017.

### ▶ NUMBER OF ANTISEMITIC AND ANTI-MUSLIM INCIDENTS



#### Antisemitic

##### ▶ SOURCE

ADL ([adl.org/audit2019](http://adl.org/audit2019))

#### Anti-Muslim

##### ▶ SOURCE

CAIR ([islamophobia.org/reports/224-2018-civil-rights-report-targeted.html](http://islamophobia.org/reports/224-2018-civil-rights-report-targeted.html))

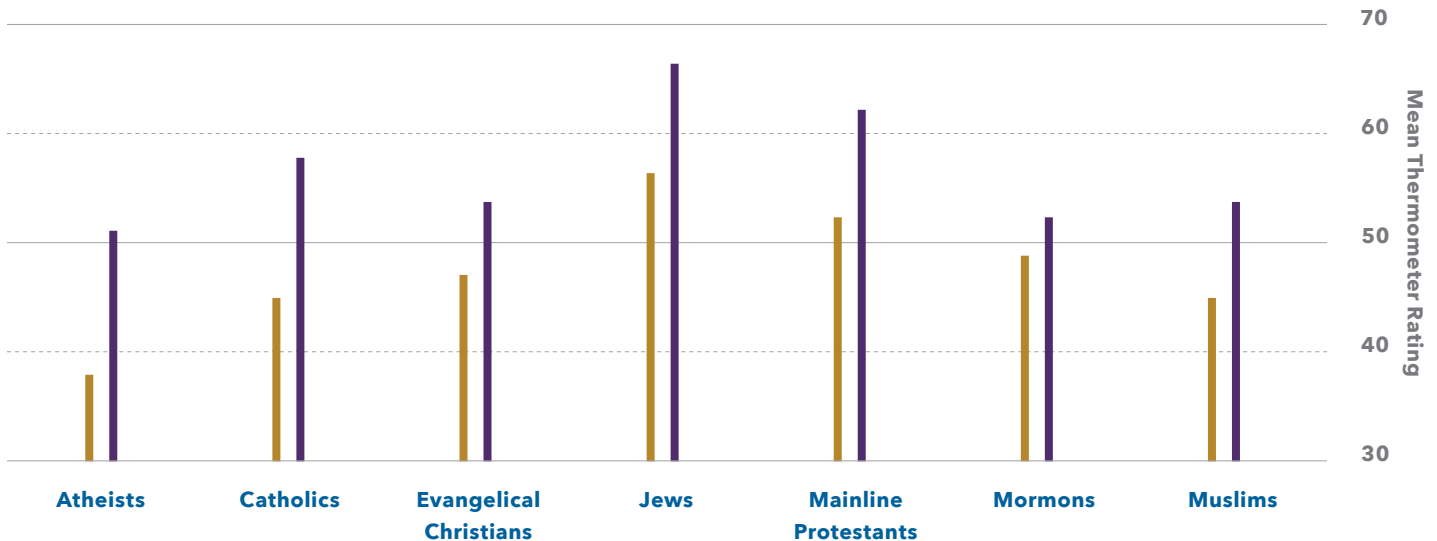


**Knowing someone from a different religious group leads people to feel more warmly about that group.**

**Therefore, the work of fostering interreligious relationships is critical for ICJs.**

Those who know someone from a religious group rate that group more warmly on a “thermometer scale” than do people who do not know someone from that group. For example, the average rating given to atheists by people who are not atheists themselves, but personally know someone who is an atheist, is 51 degrees. By contrast, the average thermometer rating given to atheists by people who do not personally know any atheists is much colder, 38 degrees.

► **RELIGIOUS GROUPS GARNER WARMEST RATINGS FROM THOSE WITH PERSONAL CONNECTIONS**



► **SOURCE**

PEW ([pewforum.org/2019/07/23/feelings-toward-religious-groups](http://pewforum.org/2019/07/23/feelings-toward-religious-groups))

— Mean thermometer rating given to religious group by those who did NOT know anyone from group  
— Mean thermometer rating given to religious group by those who DID know someone from group

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(lists current as of March 25, 2021)

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