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## **College Students' Spirituality and Religiousness Varies by Race and Gender, New Study Shows** *African Americans Most Religious Group*

While today's college students have a very high level of interest and involvement in spirituality and religion, there are important differences among student subgroups, most significantly between African Americans and Whites, and between men and women, according to new research released today.

A survey of 112,232 students at 236 colleges and universities found that the biggest differences between African American and White students was in their levels of Religious Commitment, Ethic of Caring, Religious Engagement, and Spiritual Quest. African Americans are also far more likely than Whites to believe in God, pray, and attend religious services frequently.

While gender differences are not always large, women score higher on 11 of 12 "scales" that measure various aspects of students' spirituality and religiousness. The most marked differences are in women's higher levels of Charitable Involvement and Religious Commitment.

These findings are based on the most recent analysis of data from a major national study conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at UCLA. The survey was administered last fall to entering college freshmen who attend a representative sample of colleges and universities. HERI researchers reported earlier that four in five students have an interest in spirituality, three-fourths say they are "searching for meaning or purpose in life," and more than three-quarters believe in God.

"African Americans are far more engaged with religion and spirituality than other students," said Alexander W. Astin, the Co-Principal Investigator for the project. "And while women's higher levels of spirituality and religiousness might be expected, we were surprised that some of these differences aren't more pronounced."

### **Racial Differences**

African Americans registered as the highest scorers on seven of the 12 overall measures of spirituality and religiousness studied – Religious Commitment, Compassionate Self-Concept, Spiritual Quest, Equanimity, Religious Engagement, Ethic of Caring, and Religious/Social Conservatism – compared to Whites, Latinos, Asian Americans, American Indians, and Native Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders. Whites had the lowest scores on five of the 12 scales: Ethic of Caring, Ecumenical Worldview, Charitable Involvement, Spiritual Quest, and Compassionate Self-Concept.

Latinos were the least likely overall to demonstrate high levels of Religious Engagement and, along with Asian Americans, Religious/Social Conservatism. Asian Americans were the highest scorers on Religious Skepticism and the lowest on Spirituality, Equanimity, and Religious Commitment. Native Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders were the highest scorers on Charitable Involvement, Spirituality, Ecumenical Worldview, and Religious Struggle.



Of the 112,232 students surveyed, 76% are White, 8% African American, 7% Asian American, 5% Latino, 2% American Indian/Alaska Native, and 1% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.

Additional findings include:

- 95% of African Americans believe in God, compared to 84% of Latinos, 78% of Whites, and 65% of Asian Americans.
- 91% of African Americans pray, compared to 75% of Latinos and 67% of Whites.
- 53% of African Americans attend religious services frequently, compared to 42% of Whites, 39% of Latinos, and 35% of Asian Americans.
- 47% of African Americans have a high level of Religious Commitment, compared to 25% of Whites and 22% of Asian Americans.
- 32% of African Americans have high levels of Religious Engagement, compared to 16% of Latinos and 19% of Whites.

About one-third of African Americans consider it essential to seek opportunities to grow spiritually and say that it is essential for them to follow religious teachings in their everyday life, while less than one-fifth of Whites and Asian Americans say the same.

According to HERI researchers, some of these racial/ethnic differences can be explained, in part, by the students' religious preferences since students of different religions differ notably on the various measures of spirituality and religiousness. For example, nearly half of the African American (47%) respondents are Baptist, compared to only 11% of Whites and 5% of Latinos. Nearly a third of Whites (30%) and more than half (53%) of Latinos are Roman Catholic, compared to about one-tenth of African Americans (11%). Asian Americans are the most likely to say that they have no religious preference (28%). By comparison, only 8% of African Americans and 17% of Whites indicate no religious preference.

## Gender Differences

Men score higher than women on only one of the 12 major dimensions: Religious Skepticism (21% of men versus 14% of women are high scorers). On each of the other 11 scales, women score higher than men.

The largest gender differences are on Charitable Involvement—a 10-point difference in high scorers (20% of women and 10% of men), Religious Commitment—a 9-point spread (30% of women and 21% of men), and Religious Engagement—a 6-point gap (22% of women and 16% of men). Six-point gender differences are also evident on Equanimity (25% of women versus 19% of men) and Ecumenical Worldview (16% of women and 10% of men).

Women are also more likely than men to pray (75% versus 62%) and to score high on Religious/Social Conservatism (18% versus 13%) and being on a Spiritual Quest (27% versus 22%).

When it comes to gender differences in high scorers within racial groups, the largest gap is evident for African Americans on Religious Commitment—an 18-point difference (53% of women vs. 35% of men). The 13-point gender difference in the percentage of African Americans who are high scorers on Religious Engagement (36% of women vs. 23% of men) is also nearly double that found in any other racial/ethnic group. By contrast, there is no measurable gender difference in the percentages of Asian Americans who are high scorers on Religious Engagement (19% of women and 19% of men).



Relative to other groups, notable gender differences also exist on Religious/Social Conservatism for African Americans (26% of women vs. 16% of men) and American Indians/Alaska Natives (25% of women vs. 16 percent of men).

American Indians/Alaska Natives also show the largest within-group gender differences on Charitable Involvement—a 14-point gap (27% of women vs. 13% of men) and Religious Skepticism—an 11-point difference (11% of women vs. 22% of men). Ten-point gender differences on Ecumenical Worldview are evident for both American Indians/Alaska Natives (23% of women vs. 13% of men) and Native Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders (29% of women vs. 19% of men).

## The Study

These findings on racial and gender differences are part of HERI's multi-year study, funded by the John Templeton Foundation, that examines how college students think of spirituality and its role in their lives, as well as how postsecondary institutions can better facilitate students' spiritual development.

Last spring, HERI released a report based on the survey findings entitled, *The Spiritual Life of College Students*, which indicated that students “are searching for deeper meaning in their lives, looking for ways to cultivate their inner selves, seeking to be compassionate and charitable, and determining what they think and feel about the many issues confronting their society and the global community.”

In addition to documenting high levels of interest and involvement in spirituality and religion, the study showed that students have high expectations for the role that colleges and universities can play in their spiritual and emotional development. More than two-thirds say that it is “essential” or “very important” that their college enhances their self-understanding and rate highly the role they want their college to play in developing their personal values. Nearly half also say that it is “essential” or “very important” that colleges encourage their personal expression of spirituality.

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**NOTE:** The “scales” or “factors” described in this release measure various aspects of students' spirituality and religiousness by combining a number of questionnaire items with similar content. The HERI research team developed 12 scales, which include three measures of spirituality (Spirituality, Spiritual Quest, and Equanimity), five measures of religiousness (Religious Commitment, Religious Engagement, Religious/Social Conservatism, Religious Skepticism, and Religious Struggle), and four other dimensions that are related to spirituality and religiousness (Charitable Involvement, Compassionate Self-Concept, Ethic of Caring, and Ecumenical Worldview).

**HERI** is widely regarded as one of the premiere research and policy organizations on postsecondary education in the country. Housed at the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at UCLA, it serves as an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies, and research training in post-secondary education.

More information – and a copy of the full report, *The Spiritual Life of College Students* – is available at [www.spirituality.ucla.edu](http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu).