The most important factor in Americans’ knowledge of religions, whether their own or someone else’s, is education.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life surveyed more than 3,400 people, asking them 32 questions about the Bible, Christianity and world religions in their recent "U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey." They found that the more educated you are, the more likely you are to be able to answer more questions correctly.

On average, then, education trumps religious upbringing, personal commitment to religion, belief in God or the Bible as God's word, as well as age, political party or philosophy, and region of the country in which you live as a predictor of how well people do on the survey.

The average number of correct answers for all the respondents was 16, whereas college graduates generally answered 20.6 questions accurately. The score of people who had taken at least one religion course in college went up to 22.1.

Let's take a closer look at some of the other results to put this into perspective.

By and large, it is clear that Americans do not have a lot of general knowledge about religion. The plurality of people scored a point or two from the average of 16 right answers. The plurality of scores were below 18 but above 15. If this were a test, the grade would be around 50 percent, an "F."

Of course, this was not a test; it was a sudden phone call (probably around dinner time) in which the pollster asked questions without any warning or warm up.

Still, it is interesting to realize that the cluster of scores in the middle range largely came from white Christians, both Catholics and Protestants, mainstream and evangelical. By comparison, the only religious groups whose average reached above 20 correct answers were Atheists, Jews and Mormons. This is explained in part by the emphasis on education, especially on religious matters, among these groups. Still it is disconcerting to realize that the most generally reliable person to ask about religious matters is an Atheist, someone who does NOT believe in religion.

The religion questions themselves focused on Bible, Christianity, Religion in public life, and world religions. Each of the top three groups were high scorers in two or three of these four areas. Jews and Atheists did best in the latter two, while Mormons and Atheists were at the top of the areas of Bible and Christianity.

The only areas where a middle group did well was Christianity and the Bible. On Christianity, Mormons answered correctly for 7.9 of the 12 questions, while Evangelical white Protestants were accurate for 7.3 of them. Jews' general knowledge of Christianity (6.3 correct), by the way, is higher than any other Christian groups' understanding of their own religion. The only group scoring higher was the Atheists, with 6.7 questions right.

In Bible knowledge, Evangelical white Protestants came second only to Mormons in their Scripture knowledge, averaging 5.1 correction responses (out of 7) to the Mormons' 5.7 right answers. Those who read their Bible weekly gained one correct answer over those who did not another education-related result.

The most disappointing scores concerned knowledge of world religions, with only Jews knowing enough to break into the "C" range, 72 percent, with Atheists three percentage points below. Mormons managed on average to answer just over half correctly, while Catholics and Protestants were lower. Given the increasing contact our nation has with the world and its religions through the Internet, travel and trade, that is saddening. We are not ready to deal with people who are different from ourselves.

The best predictor of this lack of knowledge of world religions has nothing to do with it. Those who believe that the Bible is God's word and must be taken literally score almost four correct questions below those who believe the Bible was written by human beings. The low average score associated with that belief (14.5) indicates that people with this belief did well on the Bible and Christianity-oriented questions, but knew little about world religions.

In the end, this essay begins where it started, namely, emphasizing the importance of education as the key to the best knowledge about religions and their place in our ever-shrinking world.

Note: To read the survey results in their entirety, go to: http://www.pewforum.org.

Programming Note: If you want to increase your knowledge of religions, online courses in Religious Studies are available every semester from the University of Wyoming.

Or visit the following web sites sponsored by the Religious Studies Program.
Exploring Religions  http://www.uwyo.edu/religionet/er
Religion Today Blog http://religion-today.blogspot.com
Bible and Interpretation  http://www.bibleinterp.com

Flesher is director of UW's Religious Studies Program. Past columns and more information about the program can be found on the Web at www.uwyo.edu/relstds. To comment on this column, visit http://religion-today.blogspot.com.