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***“Religion in Wyoming and the West: The Religious Landscape Survey”***

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The Pew Research Center for Religion and the Public Life has just released a new survey about the religious identity of Americans. The researchers interviewed more than 35,000 people so that they were able to provide results not just for the United States as a whole, but also for each state. This is the first time that a scientific study of Wyoming's religious character has taken place.

The big story for Wyoming is that the state has a large percentage of people without religious affiliation. More than a quarter of the population, 26 percent, checked the box labeled “none of the above” when asked what religion they belonged to.

Before looking more closely at Wyoming, it is worth a moment to take a look at the United States overall and the Western region generally. The national headlines from this study will be that the number of “nones” has grown 7 percent since this study was first done in 2007. Across the nation, the percentage of the religiously unaffiliated has increased from 16 percent in 2007 to 23 percent in 2014. The West has the highest percent of unaffiliated of any of the four regions of the country at 28 percent.

Although America is growing more secular, this should not arouse panic among the religious. If 23 percent are unaffiliated, that means about 77 percent or more have a religious affiliation. Even the data from Vermont, which has the highest number of nones at 37 percent, show that 61 percent of the population is religious and 54 percent follow a form of Christianity.

In this light, the data show that 66 percent of Wyoming's people adhere to Christianity and about 4 percent follow other religions, with Buddhism being the most numerous (7 percent did not answer this question). So, even though a quarter of Wyoming's population claims no religious affiliation, 70 percent do. That's well over two-thirds.

Wyoming's religious character stands out when we look at it in the context of the other Western states. Wyoming's percentage of nones is lower than the average for the West, 26 percent vs. 28 percent. Indeed, it is third lowest in the West, with only New Mexico (21 percent) and Utah (22 percent) being lower. But that is still a high number, for no state in the

Midwestern or Southern regions has a higher percentage of religiously unaffiliated people.

More significantly, Wyoming has the highest Protestant population in the West. It has the highest number of mainline Protestants (16 percent, tied with Idaho) and the third highest number of Evangelical Protestants (26 percent). At a total of 43 percent, this puts it far ahead of all but Montana, Colorado and Oregon, which are only a couple of points behind.

If you picture the United States map, you will realize that Montana, Wyoming and Colorado make a north-south line and, just to the east of them, are North and South Dakota, Nebraska and Kansas. These Midwestern states, like the rest of the Midwest region, have a high percentage of Protestants, ranging from 49 percent to 57 percent. So, the Protestant character of Wyoming and these other two Western states derives from Midwestern influence.

By contrast, Wyoming's Catholic population is certainly not following the lead of Western states like California or the Southwestern states. In those states, the Catholic population ranges from 21 percent to 34 percent, while Wyoming comes in at just 14 percent. That is well below the national average percentage of Catholics per state. Indeed, it is lower than any state in the Midwest or Northeast regions.

Interestingly, Wyoming is more influenced by Mormonism. At 9 percent, Wyoming has the third highest Mormon population in the West (after Utah and Idaho) and, indeed, in the entire USA.

So, Wyoming's religious character is overwhelmingly Christian (66 percent) and solidly Protestant (43 percent). Its Evangelical Protestants make up the largest religiously defined group (27 percent).

This is closely followed, however, by those who identify with no religious tradition or organization (26 percent). Only 6 percent of these registered as atheist or agnostic; the other 20 percent selected “nothing in particular.” And, although the number of Mormons in Wyoming ranked third highest in the nation (9 percent), that was still outnumbered by the Catholics (14 percent), even though the state ranked among the lowest in the nation in that category.