

Subj: *Sightings* 5/1/03 -- Good News for the Tolerant
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Sightings 5/1/05

Good News for the Tolerant
 -- Jonathan C. Gold

The Religion and Values department at Gallup recently initiated a new index called the "Gallup Religious Tolerance Index," which will now be part of Gallup's regular polling. To publicize this new initiative, Gallup organized an on-line seminar led by AJ Winseman who described the format of the new index and some preliminary findings. The web seminar was March 25, and I "attended" along with 60 or 70 other subscribers to Gallup's web services.

Winseman and his team use five questions to categorize individuals into three "levels" of religious tolerance: Isolated, Tolerant, and Integrated. The figures show America today as 17 percent Isolated, 46 percent Tolerant, and 37 percent Integrated.

The least tolerant, "Isolated" individuals have a view that Winseman describes as "my tribe or no tribe," believing that their faith is right and others wrong. Individuals with a medium level of tolerance are called "Tolerant," which is here described as a "live-and-let-live" attitude towards people of other faiths that is "not a negative view, but not a positive view" of other faiths. The most tolerant, the "Integrated" individuals, not only respect other traditions but "feel respected by them as well," and "actively seek to know more about and from others of different religious traditions."

Once these categories were defined, Gallup investigated break out analyses in order to determine the social and psychological "consequences" (statistically speaking) of tolerance. One of Gallup's most significant discoveries (if, in fact, it can be shown that this has not been smuggled into the definitions of the categories) is that a higher level of tolerance is correlated with a higher likelihood of membership in a faith community. As Winseman writes, this suggests that "most faith communities are doing a good job in promoting respect for other faiths." What's more, Integrated individuals -- the most tolerant among us -- are distinguished as being by far the most likely to be actively Engaged in their faith communities. (Religious "Engagement" is itself a new Gallup category summarizing answers to a separate group of questions.)

Life is better for those most open to other faiths. In answer to Gallup's standard "Life Satisfaction" question, a full 47 percent of Integrated individuals say that they are "Completely Satisfied," compared to a mere 35 and 36 percent of Isolated and Tolerant individuals, respectively. When Winseman suggests in this context that people "pay the price" for intolerance, he is mistaking a correlation for a cause: perhaps satisfied people are more likely to be open to others. Nonetheless, even this alternative possibility suggests that an intriguing characterology lies behind these statistics.

To round out this characterization of tolerance, it turns out that the more tolerant you are, the more likely you are to serve your community and to be spiritually committed -- statistics that belie the paranoid notion that learning about others undermines one's own faith commitments.

Whites are far more often Tolerant (48 to 38 percent) and far less often Integrated (35 to 45 percent) than non-whites, while whites and non-whites have an equal number of Isolated individuals (17 percent). Females are in general far more tolerant than males, with only 13 percent Isolated as compared with 22 percent of males, and 43 percent Integrated as opposed to only 33 percent of males.

The more education a person has, the more likely he is to be Tolerant, rather than Isolated: this we would have hoped for and expected. But increased education levels are also correlated with decreased levels of Integration -- suggesting that education teaches one to be tolerant, but does not teach one to be outgoing.

Still, this way of putting it suggests that the index would more properly be called the "Religious Integration Index." (We would not ordinarily say that my wanting to be your friend would make me more "tolerant" of you than my wanting to be left alone.) This points to the reason academic institutions fail to promote the full measure of "tolerance" that the index measures. Religious integration -- that is, the cross-fertilization of religious groups -- is innately an activity of religious communities, not of non-religious academic ones.

One hopes that in upcoming studies Gallup will be able to break out these findings into other relevant categorizations, especially

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age, religious denomination, and geographical distribution. In any case, as global events place religious communities into ever closer connections and confrontations, these will be numbers worth watching.

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THE RELIGION & CULTURE WEB FORUM
<http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/webforum>

This month's Religion & Culture Web Forum commentary is by Wendy Doniger and is entitled "Masquerading as One's Self: A Revealing Study of Self-Impersonation in Literature." In her essay, Professor Doniger examines several instances of self-imitation in literature and the implications of this device for our understanding of the self. We invite you to read through Professor Doniger's comments and to post your questions or insights about the essay on the public discussion board.

We would also like to remind you that recent forums by scholars Bruce Lincoln ("Mr. Atta's Meditations, Sept. 10, 2001: A Close Reading of the Text"); W. Clark Gilpin ("Testimony: The Letter from Prison in Christian History and Theology"); Paul Mendes-Flohr ("The Desert Within and Social Renewal: Martin Buber's Vision of Utopia"); and Martha Nussbaum ("Capabilities and Disabilities: Justice for Mentally Disabled Citizens") remain accessible through the Web Forum Archive.

Also, please remember to look for these upcoming Web Forum discussions:

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"Thinking about War and Justice" by Jean Bethke Elshtain (University of Chicago)

Sightings comes from the Martin Marty Center at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

Submissions policy

Sightings welcomes submissions of 500 to 750 words in length that seek to illuminate and interpret the forces of faith in a pluralist society. Previous columns give a good indication of the topical range and tone for acceptable essays. The editor also encourages new approaches to issues related to religion and public life.

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Contact information

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