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### Is there Religion at Denison?

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# Is there Religion at Denison?

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Paul A. Djupe

August 31, 2021

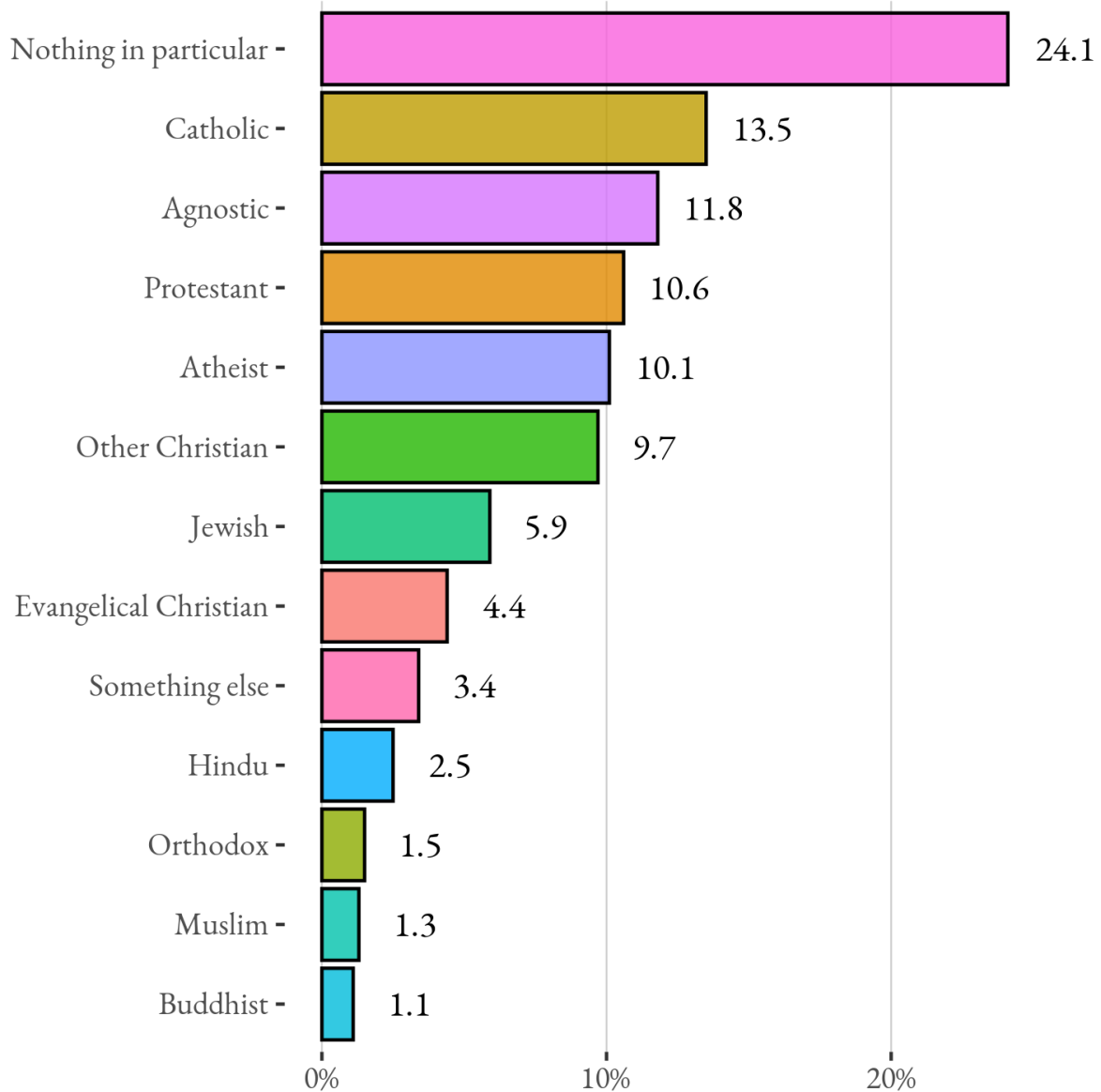
By Paul A. Djupe, Data for Political Research

One of the most stunning trends in American religion in the history of the United States is the rapid loss of religious identity in the last 35 years. The religious unaffiliated has gone from about 5 percent of the adult population in 1994 to 28 percent in 2020. The largest changes in religious affiliation prior to this period were in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, when religious affiliation gained about 10 percent in a 30 year period. Disaffiliation is hitting all generations, but none so much as you – Gen Z. In the most recent look with 2020 data, Gen Z was 44.4% unaffiliated (composed of atheists, agnostics, and those who say “nothing in particular”). What about Denison?

In March 2021, we asked a sample of just under 500 students about their religious affiliation that included the three categories of non-affiliation with religion. In the results below, it’s clear that the unaffiliated are sizable and hit the population statistic right on the nose: 45 percent are “religious nones.” The difference, though, is that a greater portion of Denison students are agnostic and atheist – 22 percent versus 13 percent of the general population of Gen Zers.

Beyond that, religion at Denison is incredibly diverse. Almost every major religious tradition in the world is represented save Sikhs, at least among survey respondents. There is truly a rich pluralism of religious identity among the student body.

## Religion at Denison is Incredibly Diverse

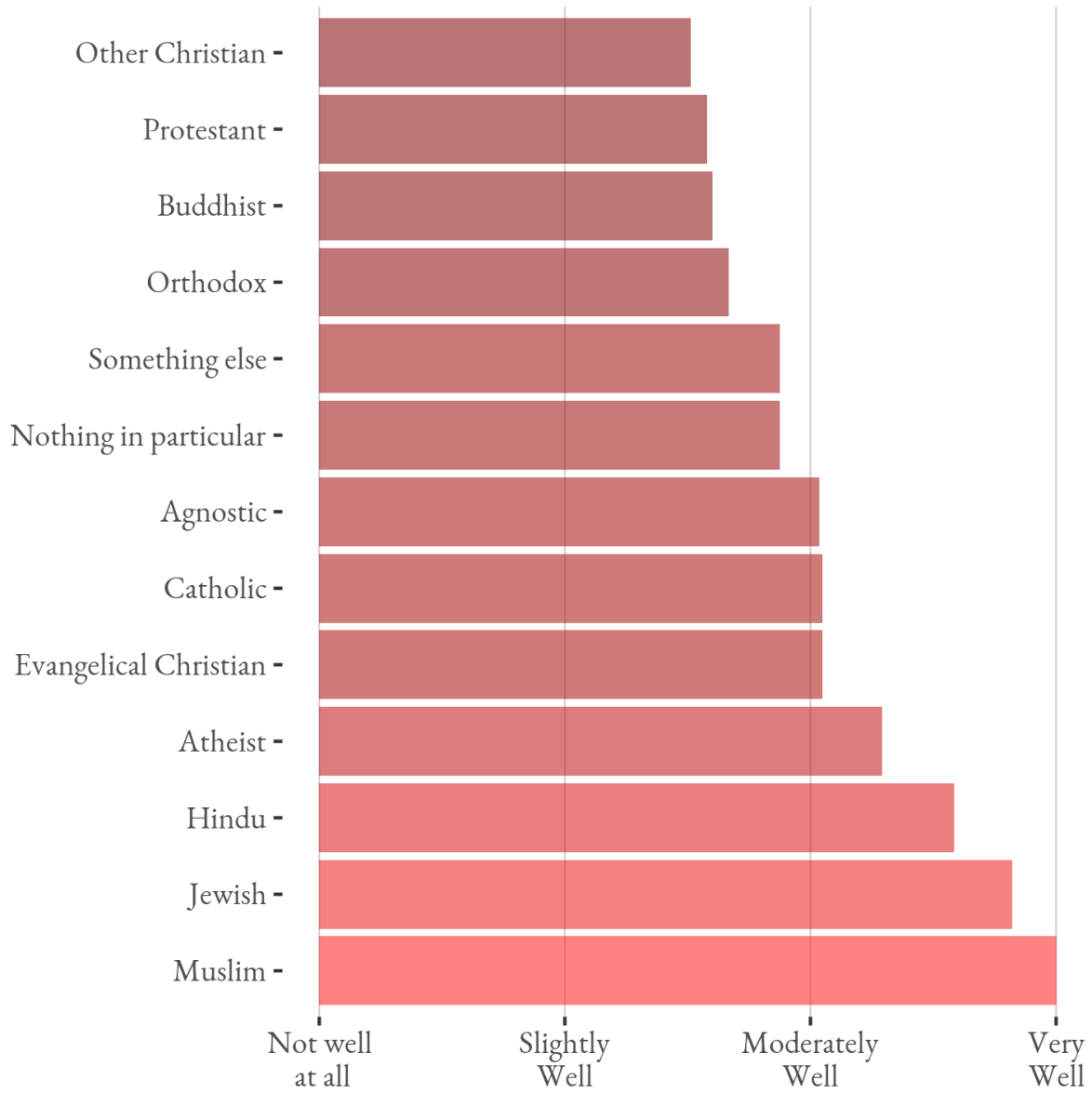


Source: March 2021 Survey.

Do other students know about that diversity though? There are certainly enough opportunities to work with diverse others at Denison in organizations, classrooms, and teams. But that pluralism can help to build tolerance and broader understanding only as long as some information about it is shared. The survey asked, “How well do people you are close to on campus know the answer you just gave about your religious identification?” The responses below by religious identity suggest that most students think their friends know only a little about their religion. That suggests a few possible lessons, but I suspect the dominant one is that students just don’t talk about religion all that much. There are a few groups who do appear to put their faith front and center: Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and Atheists. Most others’ faiths are not as well known. Notably the groups whose friends know about their faith

are also not the majority faiths on campus – they are small groups like all the others. Moreover, most all of these groups have some degree of organization on campus. Perhaps their faith is more intense.

## For Most, Friends Don't Share Much About Their Religion

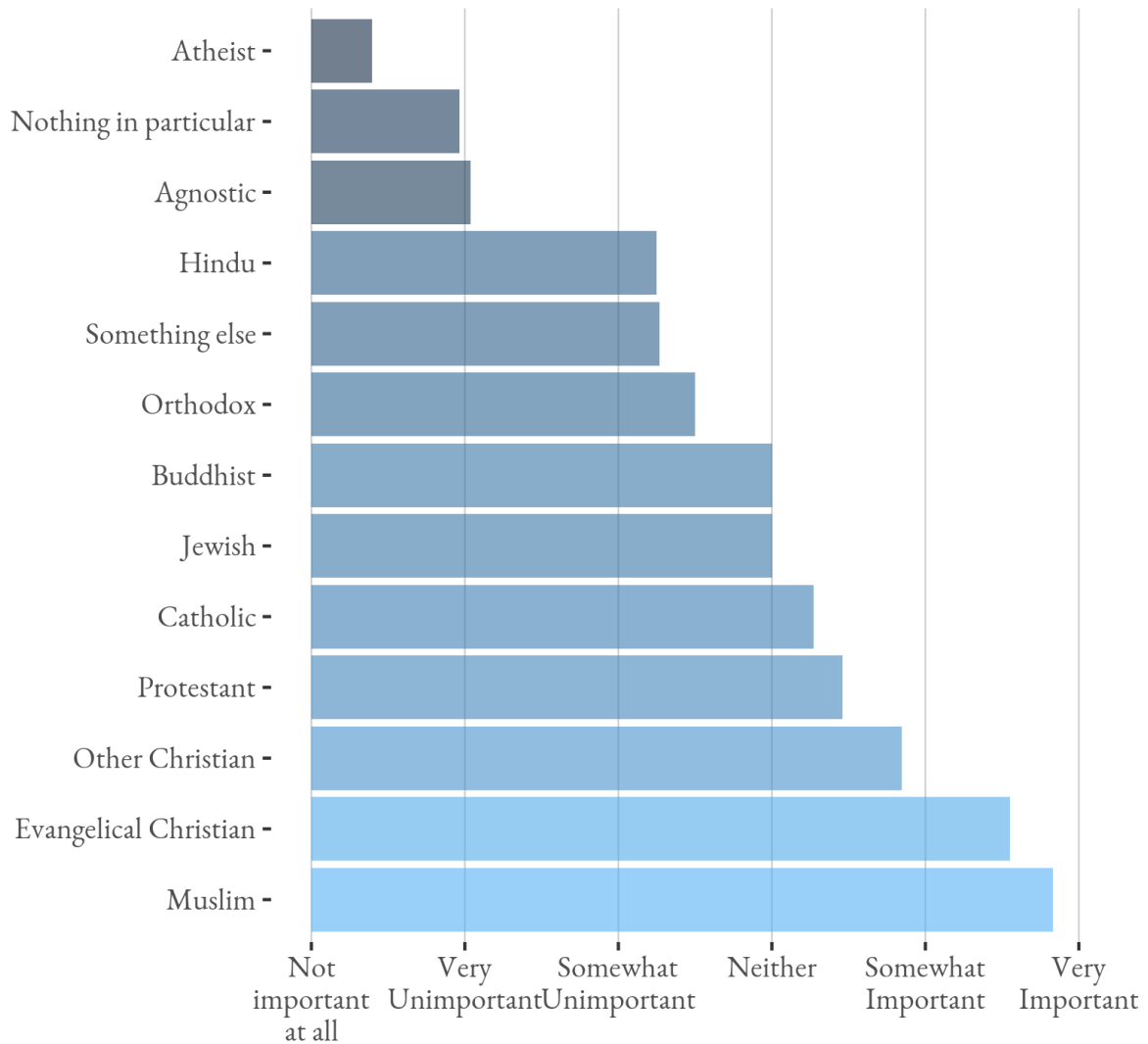


How well do friends know my religious identity?

Source: March 2021 Survey.

There may be something to the intensity thesis, though there are notable exceptions. Muslims top the chart (below) in the importance they ascribe to their faith in guiding their life. But the #2 and 3 groups above, Jews and Hindus, are nowhere near the top. Instead, they likely have other markers, including diet, holidays, and politics, that can help make their religious identity known. Of course, it would be odd if Atheists topped the charts with their religious importance – instead, it's the irrelevance of religion to their life that they want to be known.

## For Most, Religion is Unimportant in their Lives



How important is religion in guiding your life?

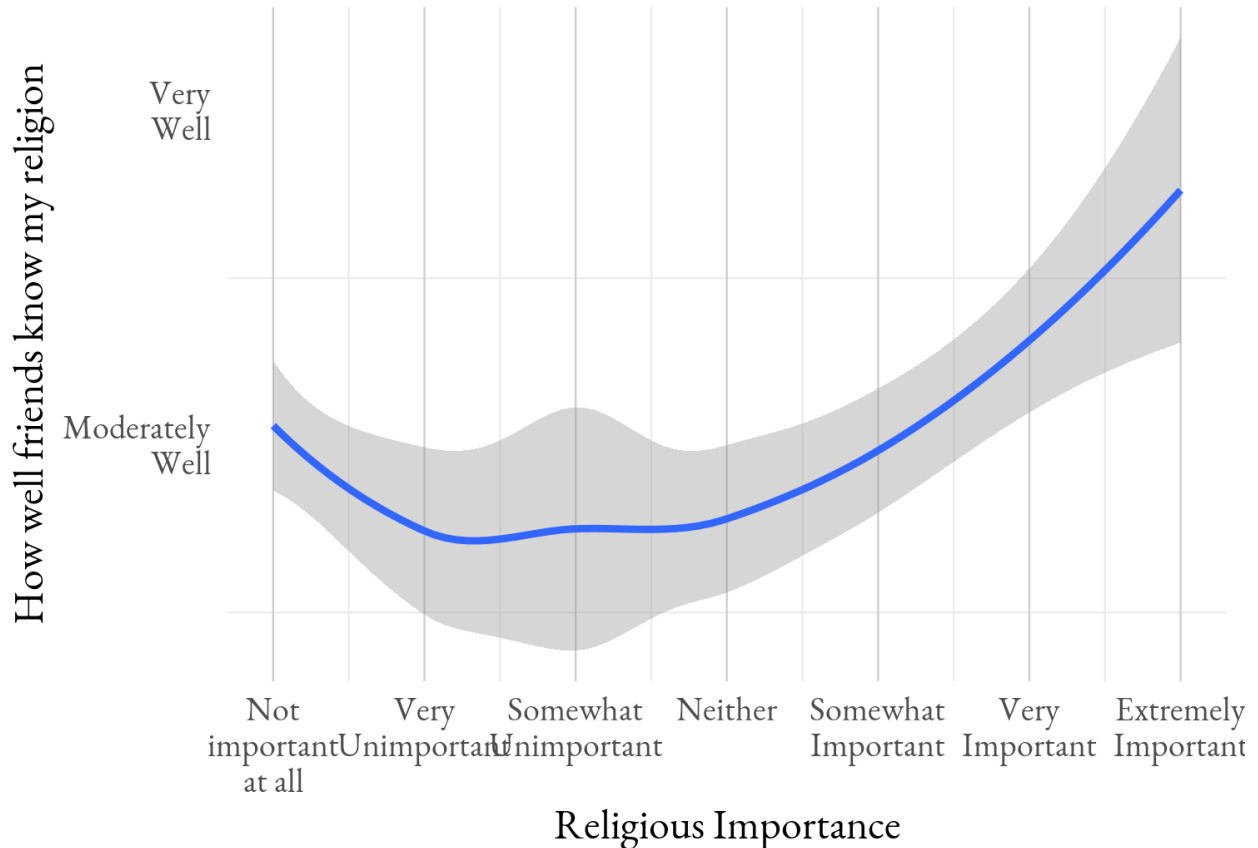
Source: March 2021 Survey.

The other notable exception is evangelicals who are the near equals of Muslims in religious importance, but for whom friends know their religious identity poorly. This cuts against the identity label – evangelical means to “share the good news” about Jesus Christ. But evangelicalism has taken a pretty serious hit to their reputation by dint of their ardent support for Donald Trump, especially among those outside the Republican Party. I suspect that evangelicals on campus are not particularly loud about their faith in this liberal bastion.

I’m most concerned about whether students feel able to share their identity with others close to them if they feel it’s important to them. The following figure shows just this, gauging how well friends know about their religious identity given how important it is in guiding their life. And it shows that when students feel religion is important to them, they are able to share their identity with their friends. What I can’t say with these data is whether their friends are

fellow believers. But given the diversity of religion at Denison, it's a good bet that at least some of their friends do not share the same identity and that's crucial to building a more inclusive campus community.

## If It's Important, Friends Know About It



Source: March 2021 Survey.

Religion in the United States has entered an incredible dynamic period, in which identity is facing increasing struggles to maintain credibility in the face of mass disaffiliation. Many are leaving religion, and more and more are being raised without it. The frequent scandals of various sorts are not helping. But, for now, religion on Denison's campus is certainly looking no worse than the national picture and the degree of knowledge and sharing looks reasonably healthy. I wish that more people would openly share about their religious background so more of the campus is aware of our religious diversity, but it's hard to ask everyone to forthrightly do the work of promoting religious understanding if they are not overly invested in that faith at this point in their lives.

*Paul A. Djupe is a local cyclist who coincidentally has taught social science research methods and political science at Denison for millenia and runs the [Data for Political Research minor](#). He started [onetwentysseven.blog](#) a few years ago in a bid to subsidize collective action. He's on [Twitter](#) and you should be too, along with [your president](#).*

