

# What's the Bigger Threat to Religious Freedom? Gay Marriage or Islam?

Americans view Islam as a threat to their own nation's religious liberty almost as strongly as they consider it a danger to religious freedom internationally, new research shows.

Although most persecution occurs overseas, 39 percent of American adults say Islam threatens religious freedom in the United States—almost as many as the 40 percent who see Islam as a global threat, a survey by Nashville-based LifeWay Research finds.

“Most recent headlines regarding Islam don't paint a picture of religious freedom—so we should not be surprised by the strong minority that consider Islam a threat to religious freedom,” said Ed Stetzer, executive director of LifeWay Research.

“However, it is worth noting less Americans see Islam as a threat to religious freedom than do not. What's of particular interest to me is not people's concern about international religious liberty—which I would expect—but that 40 percent of Americans see Islam as a threat to religious liberty in the United States.”

A slim majority, 52 percent, believes U.S. religious liberties are not at risk because of Islam.

Religious liberty has been widely discussed recently, but social policy, not Islam, has been the focus of recent religious freedom disputes in the United States. Courts have weighed religious freedom arguments in deciding whether to permit same-sex marriage, allow businesses to turn away gay

customers, and require employers to pay for birth control.

On a global scale, Americans are unsettled about the influence of Islam. While 47 percent think it doesn't endanger religious freedom internationally, almost as many (40 percent) believe it does, and 13 percent are unsure.

Researchers asked 1,000 Americans about their views in a phone survey Sept. 19-28, 2014. Earlier that same month, the Islamic militant group ISIS released videos of beheadings of two Americans, prompting President Obama to tell an alarmed public the extremist group also known as ISIL is not Islamic. But LifeWay Research found at the time 48 percent disagreed with the president's statement, while 3 in 10 were unsure. More than 1 in 4 believed ISIS is a true indication of an Islam-controlled society.

### **Religious restrictions on the rise**

Global concern about religious freedom is widespread and data shows such concern to be warranted. For example, Pew Research shows more than three-quarters of the world's people live in countries with high religious restrictions, up from about two-thirds in 2007.

In the United States, restrictions are moderate but increasing, according to Pew. Pew's measurement of hostile acts involving religion in America climbed 63 percent from 2007 to 2013, and its accounting of government restrictions on religion nearly doubled.

Americans perceive the effects, according to previous LifeWay research. More than half of Americans and 70 percent of Protestant senior pastors say religious liberty is on the decline.

Women are particularly concerned about the potential impact of Islam, with 44 percent viewing it as a risk to American religious freedom, compared to 34 percent of men. A similar

gender divide emerged in previously released LifeWay research about Sharia law, with more women than men worrying America could come under the Islamic legal and moral code that limits women's rights.

### **Young adults, Hispanics see less threat**

America's young adults are much less likely than their parents and grandparents to perceive Islam as a threat to religious freedom. Less than a third of 18- to 44-year-olds hold that view (31 percent internationally, 30 percent in the U.S.), compared to nearly half of those 45 and older (49 percent internationally, 48 percent in the U.S.). Previously released research found young Americans are less worried than their elders about Sharia law and more likely to say Islam can create a peaceful society.

Hispanics also have relatively little concern about Islam's threat to religious liberty in the United States (31 percent) or abroad (29 percent). In contrast, whites are more likely to believe Islam is a danger to religious freedom internationally (44 percent) and in the United States (41 percent).

LifeWay Research found differences along geographic lines as well, with Southerners more likely to view Islam as a risk to religious freedom than those in the West or Northeast.

Evangelical Christians are the most likely to perceive Islam as a threat. The majority of evangelicals see Islam as a danger to religious freedom both domestically (55 percent) and globally (53 percent).

In contrast, only 31 percent of Catholics, 34 percent of people from non-Christian religions, and 22 percent of the nonreligious see Islam as a threat to religious freedom in the United States. Internationally, Catholics perceive significantly greater risk at 38 percent, while the difference in opinion is slight for those from non-Christian religions (35 percent) and the nonreligious (23 percent). Protestants

view U.S. and global risks equally at 48 percent.

Overall, 45 percent of Christians say Islam is a threat to religious liberty internationally and 43 percent say it is a threat to religious freedom in America.

“Most religious people desire that other people believe—even convert to—their religion, but how a religion’s followers treat those who choose another belief differs greatly,” Stetzer said. “A large minority of Americans are concerned with how the religion of Islam is treating people with different religious views.”