

# How can we measure the state of religion in the U.S.?



## Highland Views

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Guest columnist

According to The Carolina Journal (August 26, 2025), “North Carolina ranks among the nation’s most religious states, according to a new analysis that measures faith activity, religious education, and the presence of religion-affiliated organizations.” Measuring the 50 states to come up with an “overall religiosity” score, the study found that “States in the traditional Bible Belt dominated the top of the list. Virginia ranked No. 1, followed by Tennessee, Alabama, South Carolina, Texas, North Carolina, and Mississippi.”

As for people who say they are “very religious,” North Carolina ranks high,

but takes the number one spot for “most religious establishments per capita.” I can’t say I was surprised. It’s hard to heave a hush puppy anywhere without hitting a church.

This national survey has me asking a few questions. Does this mean North Carolinians are model Christians, as well as exemplary citizens? Are they high on the ethics meter? Do they take care of our most vulnerable neighbors and perform more service projects than most? To some extent, they do. According to the study mentioned in the article, “Texas tops the list for faith and religious support charities” and North Carolina is number three. These are primarily faith-based charities, so it appears that Christians take care of their own.

How does one rank religion? Many religions rank themselves higher than others (the “only way” or “the best choice”). How many of us, when asked

how religious we are, would respond: “I’m very religious” or “I have great faith”? Compared to whom? Neighbors, friends, family? Others of us might say, “I’m not religious” or “I don’t believe in God.” This raises another question: How do we rank the quantity or quality of faith? Can you have “more faith” than another? I’m not sure how that can be measured. When I was a minister, people would often assume I had “more faith” than they did, that I was “closer to God” than they were. This was never the case. I didn’t fall into the trap of imagining I possessed a greater amount of believing trust in God than anyone else.

When Jesus said that faith as small as a mustard seed could move mountains (Matthew 17:20), he seemed to imply there are greater and lesser amounts of faith. If your faith is as big as a walnut, could you move the moon in the sky? Even if this was the case, that there

are weights and measures of faith, does this leave people guessing “how much” faith they have? And who has ever had even a seed-size faith enough to do the impossible? After all, in the seed analogy used by Jesus, the remarkable line that follows is: “nothing will be impossible for you.” Nothing. It shouldn’t take much more than a bag of seeds – a congregation or two, or let’s say all the congregations in North Carolina – to end poverty, hunger, homelessness or societal conflicts. In my way of thinking, that would be much more impressive than moving a mountain range or a celestial object.

I hear the objection: “Great faith is shown by the people of God working together to do great things.” That would be wonderful, but there are so many individual churches to manage. And, let’s be

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honest, with such a great amount of very religious people, especially in “high-ranking” states, don’t you think those “great amounts” of human service would have been accomplished years ago? Is this impossible for faith, or for

God? Are we any closer to eliminating the “mountain” of poverty? Are the religious leading the way to assure everyone receives “great” healthcare and housing?

Here’s a friendly suggestion: When so much attention is given to religiosity and institutions of faith, perhaps the time is ripe to bring more secular people into the story of community and country. Think of all the churches (not to

mention synagogues, mosques and temples) across each state, dividing up communities with all those various beliefs (competitive “greatness”). Wouldn’t it be a good thing to hear more people say “I’m very secular” and “Though I don’t believe in God, I believe in people helping people”? What if we moved away from the rankings, the winners and losers in faith competitions, to find ways to create space for creative

ideas that make our communities and states better, healthier?

Could we score higher, together?

*Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (chighland.com).*