



# Religious background and educational attainment: The effects of Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The effects of Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism on educational attainment in the United States are examined. OLS estimates of educational attainment and Probit estimates of college attainment are undertaken. It is shown that Islam and Judaism have similar positive effects on attainment relative to Protestants and Catholics. The effect of Buddhism is specific to respondents who were living in the United States at age sixteen and/or were born in the United States. Data from the National Opinion Research Center's "General Social Survey: 1998–2008" are used.

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## 1. Introduction

It is well known that a Jewish background has been associated with higher levels of educational attainment and very high levels of academic success. For example, 27% of the American scientists who won the Nobel Prize between 1901 and 1965 were Jewish (Van Den Haag, 1969). Jews are overrepresented as Nobel Prize winners in economics by a factor of 200 to 1 (Nisbett, 2009). Gary Becker attributes the success of Jews in the United States (and elsewhere) to the high marginal rate of return they receive from investments in their children (Becker, 1991). Other hypotheses regarding the origin of Jewish effects on educational attainment and academic achievement include Jews investing more in education because of past discrimination and the risks associated with investments in land and physical capital (Brenner & Kiefer, 1981). Thus, they attribute higher invest-

ments in education to differences in relative prices rather than a taste for education. Nisbett (2009) attributes a positive Jewish effect to cultural values while Sowell (1981) notes that Jews have "a passion for education."

Although the Jewish success story is not in question, less is known about other relatively small religious groups in the United States. The self-described religious identification of about half of the population of the United States is Protestant while about one in four identifies themselves as Catholic. The largest non-Christian religious groups that are the focus of this paper are Jews (1.4%), Muslims (0.5%), and Buddhists (0.5%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). The exact percentage that a religious group represents in the population varies depending upon how membership is measured. For example, if one parent is Jewish while the other parent is not, children may or may not be counted as Jewish.

According to the National Opinion Research Center's "General Social Survey: 1998–2008" (GSS) the self-defined religious preference of the population is slightly different: Jews account for 2.0% of the population while Muslims and Buddhists account for 0.5% and 0.6%, respectively. If religious upbringing is used to measure religion, the Jewish

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**Table 1**

Educational attainment by religious upbringing.

	Buddhist	Catholic	Jewish	Muslim	Protestant	No religion
Grade school	12.7%	14.8%	1.6%	6.8%	14.1%	17.4%
High school	29.7%	48.8%	27.9%	32.1%	53.2%	47.3%
Some college	8.1%	8.6%	4.9%	15.5%	8.0%	7.5%
Bachelor's degree	32.8%	19.0%	30.1%	22.6%	16.4%	18.0%
Graduate degree	16.6%	8.8%	35.5%	22.9%	8.3%	9.8%
N	72	4492	305	90	8086	981

Source: National Opinion Research Center (2009).

share is 2.1% while Buddhists and Muslims account for 0.5% and 0.6%, respectively. Further, the Catholic and Protestant shares increases by six and three percentage points, respectively, if religious upbringing is used to measure religious preference. The percentage with no religious upbringing is about 7% while respondents with no religion in the population is about 14%. In this paper, religious upbringing is used to measure religion because current religion is an endogenous choice. Current religious preference includes converts and it excludes defectors. If current religion is used to estimate economic and demographic variables, this can result in seriously biased estimates. For example, 21% of Muslims in the United States are converts to Islam and have below average educational attainment (Pew Research Center, 2007).

Data from the GSS indicate relatively high levels of educational attainment by respondents with a Buddhist, Jewish, or Muslim religious upbringing relative to respondents with a Catholic or Protestant upbringing (and those with no religious upbringing). Based upon the GSS data, about two out of three Jews have at least a college education (sixteen or more years of schooling) while almost one out of two Buddhists and Muslims have at least an undergraduate college education. Only about one out of four Catholics and Protestants has a college education. Buddhists also have a relatively high percentage of respondents with less than a high school education (called “Grade School”) (Table 1).

Although census data are not collected on religious upbringing in the United States, data are available on religion in the Canadian census. The Canadian data (for 2001) also indicate the highest levels of attainment for Jews although Buddhists generally have low levels of attainment. Attainment by other religious groups depends upon their age and gender. For men, Muslims have high levels of attainment relative to Catholics and Protestants. For younger women, Muslims have about the same level of attainment as Protestants and Catholics. For older women, Muslims have relatively low levels of attainment (Jedwab, 2009).

One of the important aspects of the Buddhist and Muslim populations is that vast majority were not born in the United States. This is not the case for the Catholics, Jews, and Protestants. Protestants as a group have the longest presence in the United States followed by Catholics and Jews (Table 2). The vast majority of respondents in the United States with a Buddhist upbringing have an Asian ethnicity (especially, Chinese, Indian, and Japanese). It is well known that Asians as a group are also quite successful in the United States. For example, although Asians only account for about 2% of the population in the United States,

**Table 2**

Location of birth by religious upbringing.

	Born US	Both parents born US	Both grandparents born US
Buddhist	28%	16%	3%
Catholic	80%	66%	32%
Jewish	86%	61%	17%
Muslim	17%	10%	9%
Protestant	96%	92%	73%
None	86%	78%	57%

Source: National Opinion Research Center (2009).

they have a major presence at top universities like Berkeley and Harvard (see Hirschman & Wong, 1986; Nisbett, 2009). Thus, it is important to separate out the effect of an Asian ethnicity from the effect of a Buddhist background.

The effects of religion and religiosity on educational attainment and other economic and demographic outcomes have received considerable attention over time. Whereas an older literature (e.g., Lenski, 1963; Weber, 1930) was more speculative, more recent studies have the benefit of relatively large data sets (e.g., see Chiswick, 1986, 1988; Freeman, 1986; Gruber, 2005; Lehrer, 1999, 2004a, 2004b; Sander, 1992; Tomes, 1984). Lehrer (in press) provides a review of many of the more recent studies. Some of the findings in this literature include lower levels of educational attainment by conservative Protestants and individuals with no religious upbringing and similar levels of attainment by Catholics and Protestants. This study will utilize one of the important data sets that have been used in many studies on religious effects to examine the effects of relatively small religious groups on educational attainment in the United States. This is an important topic for research because educational attainment is an important determinant of earnings and economic mobility. Further, it is important to know more about the effects of religion on educational attainment and academic achievement because the effects of religious schools might otherwise be confounded with the effects of religion. Many studies address this issue (e.g., Cohen-Zada, 2009; Goldhaber, 1996; Lankford & Wyckoff, 1992).

This paper focuses on the effect of a Buddhist, Jewish, and Muslim background on educational attainment. It will be shown that a Jewish or Muslim background increases attainment in all cases. This is the case for all respondents in these groups as well as respondents who were born in the United States and for respondents who were living in the United States at age sixteen. For respondents with a

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