

FOR RELEASE JULY 20, 2020

# The Global God Divide

*People's thoughts on whether belief in God is necessary to be moral vary by economic development, education and age*

**BY** *Christine Tamir, Aidan Connaughton and Ariana Monique Salazar*

**FOR MEDIA OR OTHER INQUIRIES:**

Jacob Poushter, Associate Director, Global Attitudes Research  
Stefan Cornibert, Communications Manager

202.419.4372

[www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org)

**RECOMMENDED CITATION**

Pew Research Center, July 20, 2020, "The Global God Divide"

## About Pew Research Center

Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world. It does not take policy positions. The Center conducts public opinion polling, demographic research, content analysis and other data-driven social science research. It studies U.S. politics and policy; journalism and media; internet, science and technology; religion and public life; Hispanic trends; global attitudes and trends; and U.S. social and demographic trends. All of the Center's reports are available at [www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org). Pew Research Center is a subsidiary of The Pew Charitable Trusts, its primary funder.

© Pew Research Center 2020

## How we did this

This report explores cross-national perceptions of religion, including the connection between belief in God and morality, the role God and prayer play in people's lives and the importance of religion. It also includes trend analyses about the evolution of the importance of God in Europe since the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

For this report, we used data from a survey conducted across 34 countries from May 13 to Oct. 2, 2019, totaling 38,426 respondents. The surveys were conducted face-to-face across Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, and on the phone in United States and Canada. In the Asia-Pacific region, face-to-face surveys were conducted in India, Indonesia and the Philippines, while phone surveys were administered in Australia, Japan and South Korea. Across Europe, the survey was conducted over the phone in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the UK, but face-to-face in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Slovakia and Ukraine.

Here are the questions used for the report, along with responses, and the survey [methodology](#).

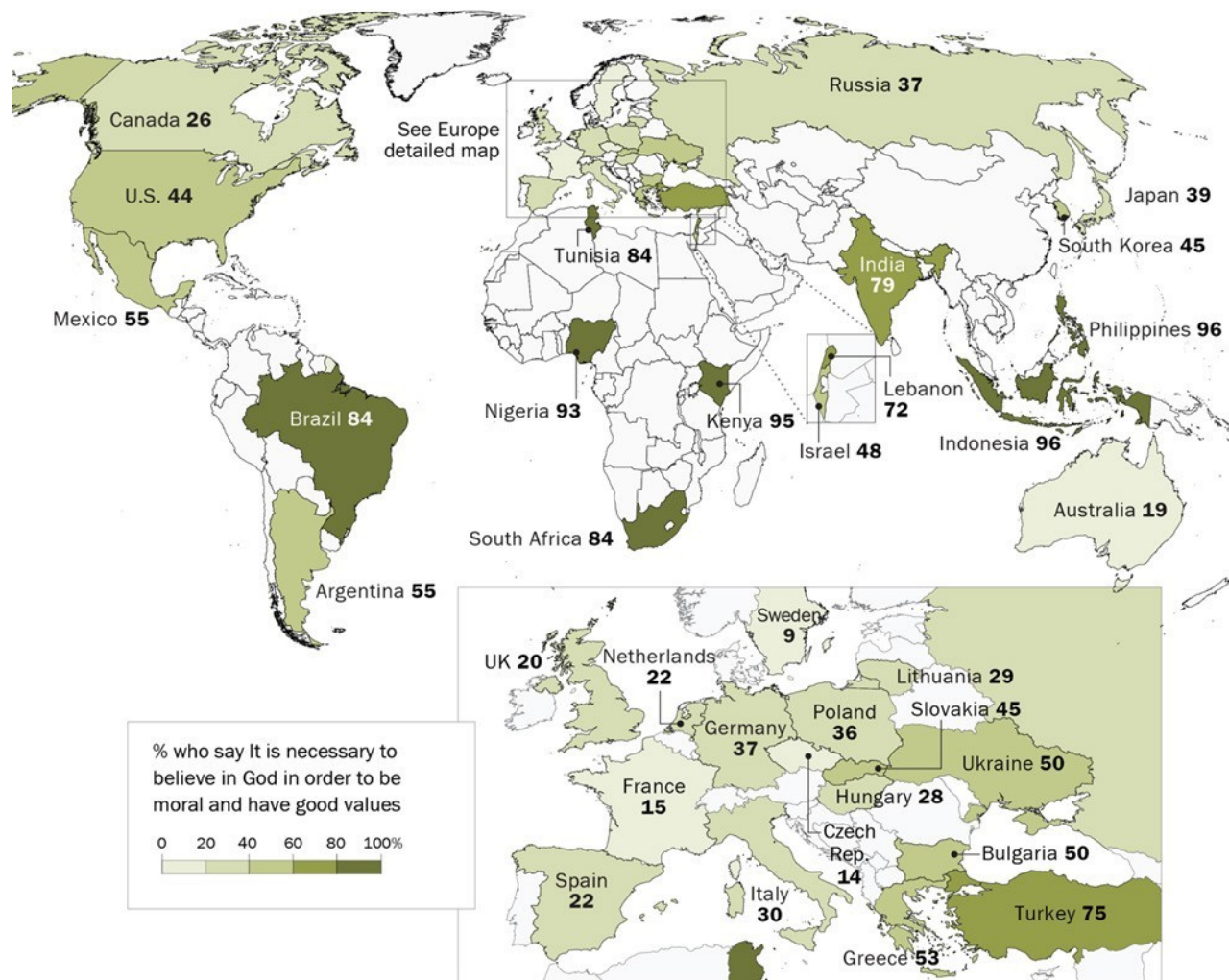
# The Global God Divide

*People's thoughts on whether belief in God is necessary to be moral vary by economic development, education and age*

What is the connection between belief in God and morality? And how important are God and prayer in people's lives? Pew Research Center posed these questions to 38,426 people in 34 countries in 2019.

## Majorities in emerging economies connect belief in God and morality

*% who say it is necessary to believe in God in order to be moral and have good values*



Source: Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey, Q30.



Across the 34 countries, which span six continents, a median of 45% say it is necessary to believe in God to be moral and have good values. But there are large regional variations in answers to this question.

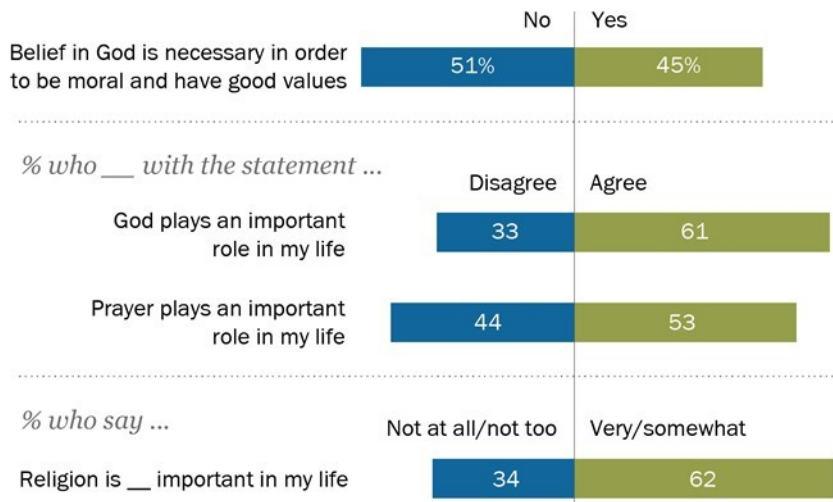
People in the emerging economies included in this survey tend to be more religious and more likely to consider religion to be important in their lives, and they are also more likely than people in this survey who live in advanced economies to say that belief in God is necessary to be moral. Differences occur *within* countries as well. In general, people who are relatively nonreligious are more inclined than highly religious people in the same countries to say it is *not* necessary to believe in God to be a moral person.

Despite variances in religious observance, a median of 62% across the countries surveyed say that religion plays an important role in their lives, while 61% agree that God plays an important role in their lives and 53% say the same about prayer. Since 1991, the share of people who say God is important to them has increased in Russia and Ukraine, while the opposite has occurred over the same time span in Western Europe.

In the eight Western European publics surveyed, a median of just 22% say belief in God is necessary to be moral, while in the six

### Many say religion is important and God plays an important role in their lives, less consensus on belief in God and morality

% who say ...



Note: Percentages are medians based on 34 countries.

Source: Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey. Q30, Q66a-b & Q85.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

## Eastern European

nations studied, a median of 33% share the same view. Prior research establishes the European continent as increasingly secular on the whole, though among Europeans, there are [notable differences between Eastern and Western countries](#) in attitudes toward religion and religious minorities.

## Opinions on whether belief in God is necessary to have good values vary by region

Of all 13 countries surveyed in the European

Union, Greece has the largest share of residents who tie belief in God to morality (53%), followed closely by Bulgaria (50%) and Slovakia (45%). Still, in many countries on the European

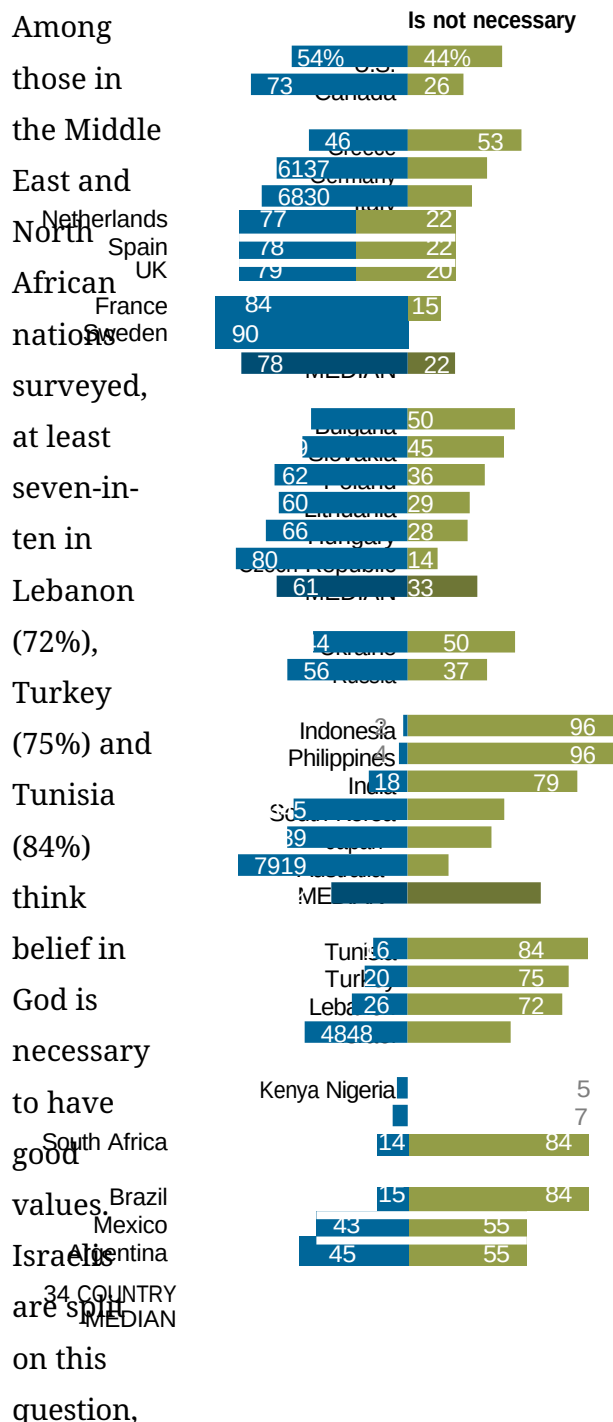
continent, relatively few people say it is necessary to believe in God to be moral, including just 9% in Sweden, 14% in the Czech Republic and 15% in France.

Less than half in both Canada and the U.S. say belief in God is necessary to be moral (26% and 44%, respectively). (For more on religion in the U.S., go to [“In a Politically Polarized Era, Sharp Divides in Both Partisan Coalitions.”](#))

By contrast, nearly everyone surveyed in Indonesia and the Philippines (96% each) draws a connection between belief in God and having good values. And nearly eight-in-ten (79%) in India say the same. But in East Asia, South Koreans are somewhat split on this question (53% say it is necessary, 46% say it is not), while smaller shares in Japan (39%) and Australia (19%) take the view that it’s necessary to believe in God to be a moral person.

## Most in Western Europe say belief in God not needed to be moral

% who say belief in God \_\_ in order to be moral and have good values



Is necessary



with 48% of the population on either side.

Source: Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey, Q30.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER



Additionally, strong majorities in each of the sub-Saharan African nations surveyed say belief in God is necessary to be moral. Over nine-in-ten in Kenya and Nigeria (95% and 93%, respectively) connect belief in God with morality, while 84% of South Africans are of the same opinion.

Majorities in all three Latin American countries surveyed say that belief in God is necessary to be moral, with the highest share in Brazil (84%). Catholicism remains [the largest religion](#) in Latin America, and majorities of Catholics in all three nations surveyed think it is necessary to believe in God to be moral.

Strikingly, both Russia and Ukraine have seen an evolution of opinion on this question, but in opposite directions. Russia has seen an 11 percentage point increase since 2002 in the share who say belief in God is necessary to have good values, while Ukraine has seen an 11-point drop. Aside from Russia, only two other countries – Bulgaria and Japan – have seen significant increases in the share of their publics who hold this opinion (17 points and 10 points, respectively). In addition to Ukraine, four other countries – Mexico, Turkey, South Korea and the United States – have seen significant decreases in the percentage of their publics who say belief in God is necessary to be moral.

---

### Connection between belief in God and morality over time

*% who say it is necessary to believe in God in order to be moral and have good values*

	2002	2019	Change
	%	%	
Bulgaria	33	50	<b>+17</b>
Russia	26	37	<b>+11</b>
Japan	29	39	<b>+10</b>
Mexico	61	55	-6
Turkey	84	75	<b>-9</b>
Ukraine	61	50	<b>-11</b>
South Korea	56	45	<b>-11</b>
U.S.	58	44	<b>-14</b>

Note: All differences shown are statistically significant.  
Source: Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey. Q30.

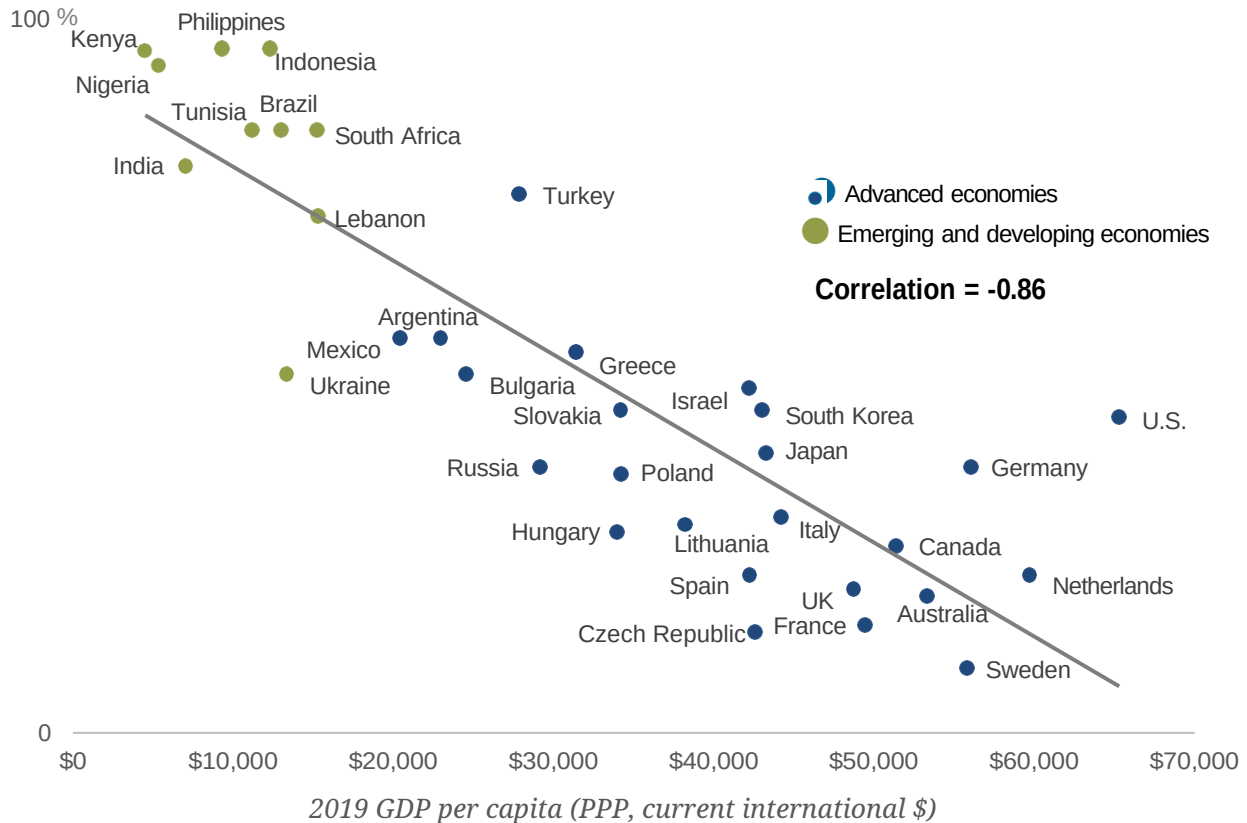
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

---

## Differences in views on belief in God and morality by GDP per capita

### Countries with higher GDP per capita less likely to tie belief in God to morality

*% who say it is necessary to believe in God in order to be moral and have good values*



Note: Figures for gross domestic product per capita, measured by purchasing power parity (PPP) in current international \$ from the World Development Indicators database, World Bank. Data accessed July 6, 2020. For more details, see Appendix B.

Source: Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey, Q30.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Overall, respondents in nations with lower gross domestic product are more likely to say that belief in God is necessary to be moral and have good values. In other words, there is an inverse relationship between GDP per capita and the percentage of the public that draws this connection between belief in God and morality. Statistical analysis shows a strong inverse correlation, with a coefficient of -0.86.

For example, in Kenya, which has the lowest GDP per capita of all 34 nations included in this analysis (\$4,509 in 2019) 95% of respondents express the view that belief in God is

integral to being moral.

By contrast, only 9% of respondents in Sweden – which has one of the highest GDP per capita of the nations surveyed (\$55,815 in 2019) – say belief in God is necessary to be moral. This pattern is consistent with prior research that has found that [Europeans tend to be less religious](#) than people in many other parts of the world.

On an individual basis, those who earn at or above the median income threshold in most nations are significantly less likely to say that belief in God is necessary for morality. The largest difference between those at different income levels is in the U.S., where there is a 24 percentage point difference between those below the median income and those at or above it.

### Those with higher incomes less likely to see belief in God as necessary

*% who say it is necessary to believe in God in order to be moral and have good values*

	Lower income %	Higher income %	Diff
U.S.	56	32	-24
Israel	64	42	-22
Argentina	68	48	-20
Bulgaria	58	39	-19
Hungary	37	18	-19
Lebanon	79	65	-14
Poland	43	29	-14
Canada	33	20	-13
Slovakia	56	44	-12
Germany	43	31	-12
Spain	28	16	-12
Australia	25	13	-12
Mexico	60	48	-12
Tunisia	91	80	-11
Russia	43	32	-11
Italy	35	24	-11
Netherlands	27	16	-11
UK	25	14	-11
Greece	59	49	-10
Ukraine	57	47	-10
Sweden	14	4	-10
Turkey	80	71	-9
South Korea	49	40	-9
Lithuania	34	25	-9
Czech Rep.	22	13	-9
France	19	10	-9

Note: Only statistically significant differences shown. Respondents with a household income below the approximate country median are considered lower income. Those with an income at or above the approximate country median are considered higher income. Source: Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey. Q30.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER



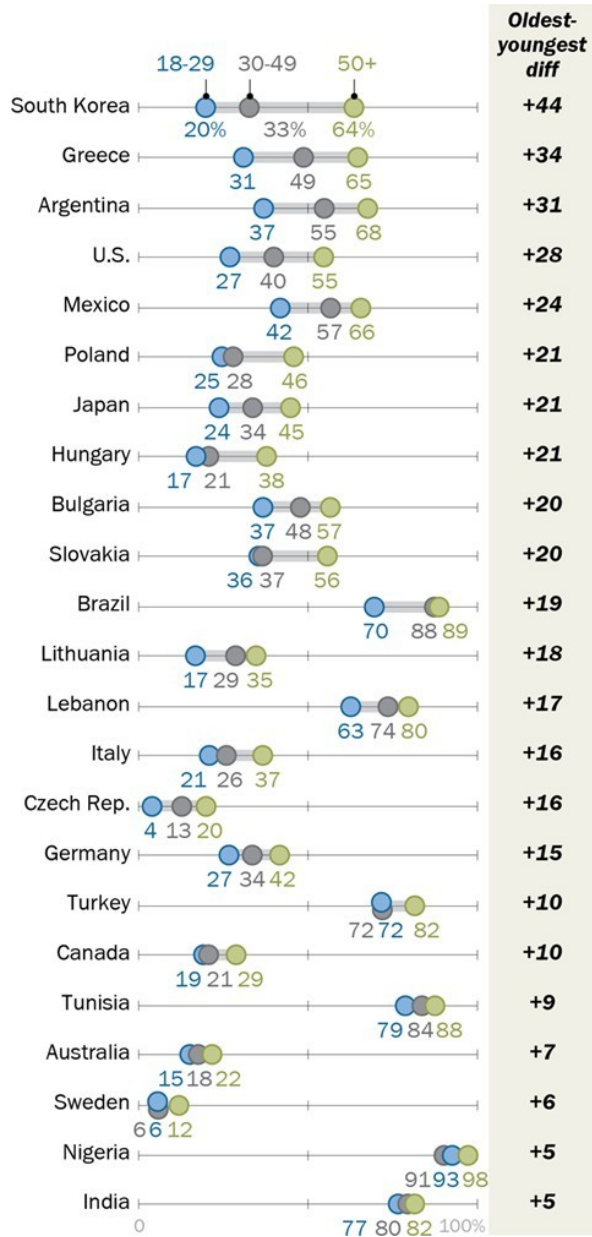
Most countries surveyed display generational gaps on the question of whether belief in God is necessary in order to be moral and have good values. In keeping with [past analyses](#) that found younger adults are generally less religious by several measures, 18- to 29-year-olds are the least likely to say it is necessary to believe in God to be moral. In a majority of the 34 countries surveyed, those ages 50 and older are significantly more likely than those ages 18 to 29 to think that belief in God is necessary for morality.

This is especially true in South Korea, where 64% of older adults take the position that belief in God is connected with morality, while only one-fifth of younger South Koreans say the same. The gap between adults ages 50 and older and adults ages 18 to 29 is equal to or greater than 20 percentage points in South Korea, Greece, Argentina, the U.S., Mexico, Poland, Japan, Hungary, Bulgaria and Slovakia.

Age gaps on this question are present in nearly every region of the world. In Nigeria, Tunisia, Turkey and Brazil, at least seven-in-ten people in every age group agree that belief in God is necessary to morality. However, in the Czech Republic and Sweden, no more than two-in-ten people in every age group take that position. In no country surveyed were 18- to 29-year-olds more likely than older age cohorts to say

### Wide age gaps in most countries on whether belief in God is morally necessary

% who say it is necessary to believe in God in order to be moral and have good values



Note: Only statistically significant differences shown.

that it is necessary to believe in God to be moral.

## More education connected with belief that God is not necessary to have good values

In most European and North American countries surveyed, individuals with more education are less likely to say that belief in God is necessary to be moral. This pattern closely tracks the connection between income levels and the way people answer this question, because there is a [significant correlation](#) between educational attainment and earnings.

In addition, there are differences on this question among respondents at different education levels in several other nations included in the 2019 survey. In 24 out of the 34 countries surveyed, respondents with higher levels of education are significantly less likely to say belief in God is necessary to be moral. There are no significant differences among the other 10 countries included in the survey.

## Those with more education less likely to see belief in God as necessary

*% who say it is necessary to believe in God in order to be moral and have good values*

	Less education %	More education %	Diff
Argentina	59	26	<b>-33</b>
Mexico	67	36	<b>-31</b>
Greece	59	32	<b>-27</b>
Turkey	79	56	<b>-23</b>
Lebanon	79	60	<b>-19</b>
Tunisia	90	72	<b>-18</b>
U.S.	52	34	<b>-18</b>
Israel	56	39	<b>-17</b>
Hungary	32	15	<b>-17</b>
Brazil	91	77	<b>-14</b>
Germany	41	27	<b>-14</b>
Poland	40	26	<b>-14</b>
Italy	32	18	<b>-14</b>
Ukraine	52	39	<b>-13</b>
Slovakia	48	35	<b>-13</b>
Lithuania	33	20	<b>-13</b>
Netherlands	27	14	<b>-13</b>
Russia	45	33	<b>-12</b>
Canada	33	21	<b>-12</b>
Bulgaria	53	43	<b>-10</b>
South Korea	49	41	<b>-8</b>
UK	22	14	<b>-8</b>
Spain	24	17	<b>-7</b>
France	17	10	<b>-7</b>

Note: Only statistically significant differences shown. For the purpose of comparing educational groups across countries, education levels are standardized based on the UN's International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). The "less education" category is below secondary education and the "more education" category is secondary or above in Brazil, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Lebanon, Mexico, Nigeria, Philippines, South Africa, Tunisia and Ukraine. The "less education" category is secondary education or below and the "more education" category is postsecondary or above in Argentina, Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Japan, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, the UK and the U.S.  
Source: Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey. Q30.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER





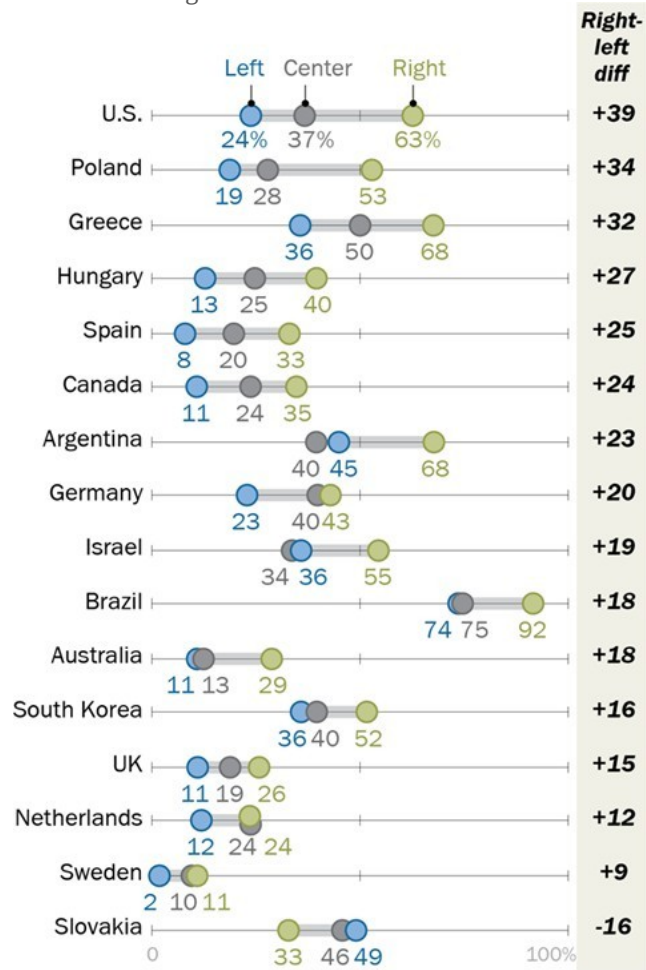
In 15 countries surveyed, those on the ideological right are significantly more likely to say it is necessary to believe in God in order to be moral and have good values (ideology is self-reported and varies by country). Majorities of those on the right in the U.S., Greece, Argentina and Israel say that belief in God is necessary for morality; less than half of those on the left in those countries say the same. The left-right gap exceeds 30 percentage points in the U.S., Poland and Greece.

Though only about one-in-ten right-leaning Swedes say that it is morally necessary to believe in God, the right-left gap persists even in Sweden: Just 2% of those on the left say the same. Those on the right also are significantly more likely to say it is necessary to believe in God in order to be moral in Hungary, Spain, Canada, Argentina, Germany, Israel, Brazil, Australia, South Korea, the UK, the Netherlands and Sweden.

Slovakia is the only country surveyed where those on the *left* are more likely to say that it is necessary to believe in God in order to be moral: 49% of those on the left in Slovakia agree, compared with 33% of those on the right.

### Those on the ideological right more likely to say belief in God is necessary

*% who say it is necessary to believe in God in order to be moral and have good values*



Note: Only statistically significant differences shown.

Source: Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey. Q30.

## The importance of religion varies around the globe

In most of the countries surveyed, more than half of the public says religion is either “very important” or “somewhat important” in their lives.

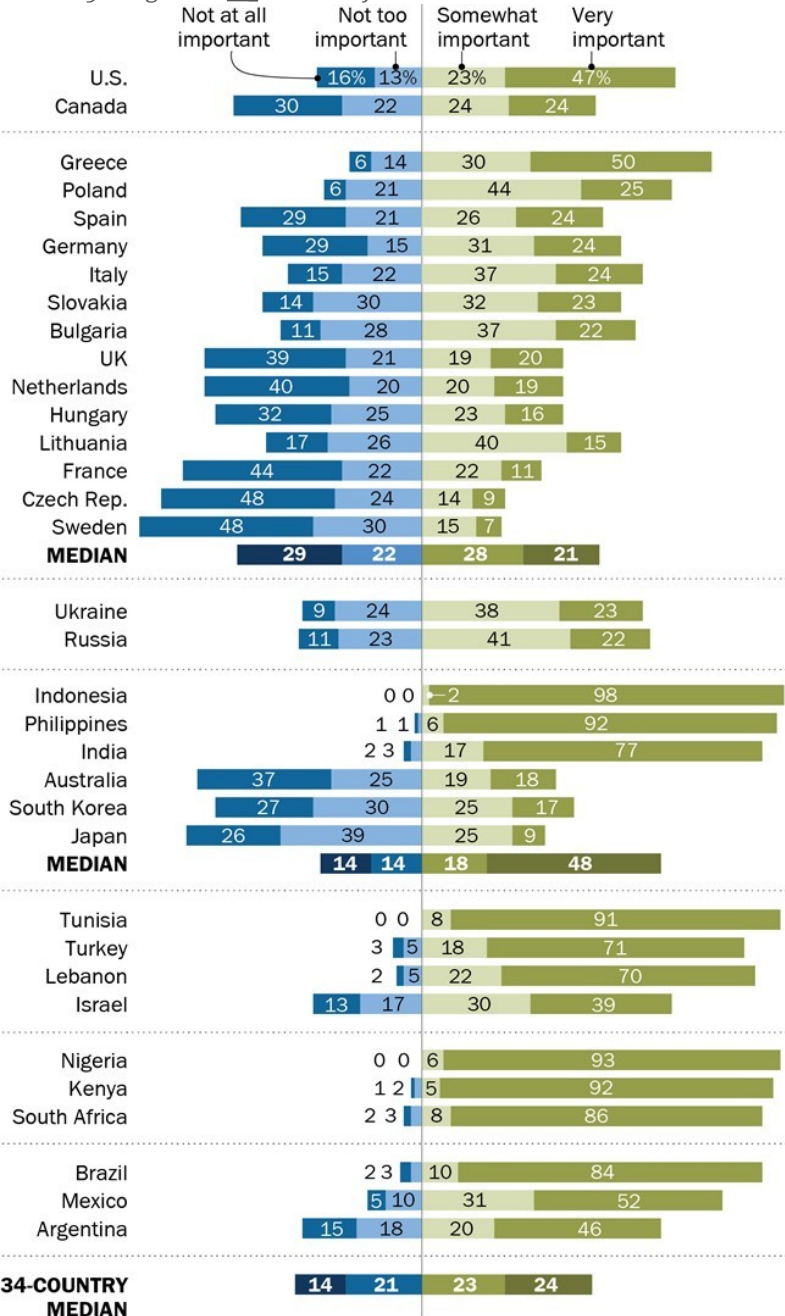
However, Europeans generally show less religious commitment on this measure than people in other regions.

When asked about the importance of religion in their lives, majorities in 23 out of 34 countries say religion is very or somewhat important to them. This includes nine-in-ten or more in Indonesia, Nigeria, Tunisia, the Philippines, Kenya, India, South Africa, Brazil and Lebanon.

Majorities in several of these countries have particularly high levels of religious commitment, saying religion is *very* important their lives. Such attitudes are common

## Europeans somewhat mixed on the importance of religion, but overall less committed

% who say religion is \_\_\_ in their life



in Indonesia (98%), the  
Philippines (92%), Tunisia  
(91%), Brazil (84%), India  
(77%), Turkey (71%),  
Lebanon (70%) and all  
African countries surveyed –  
93% in Nigeria,

92% in Kenya and 86% in South Africa.

Meanwhile, the European countries in the study tend to have much smaller shares who say religion is either very or somewhat important in their lives, including 22% of adults in Sweden, 23% in the Czech Republic, 33% in France and 39% in both the Netherlands and Hungary.

In multiple European nations, pluralities say religion is “not at all” important in their lives. This is the case in the Czech Republic, France, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom, where adults are more likely to say religion is not at all important in their lives than to choose any other answer option.

On the other hand, more than six-in-ten respondents in Greece, Poland and Italy say religion is very or somewhat important in their lives. More people in Greece say religion is at least somewhat important to them (80%) than in any other European country. Lesser majorities in Germany, Slovakia, Lithuania (each at 55%) and Bulgaria (59%) say religion is at least somewhat important to them.

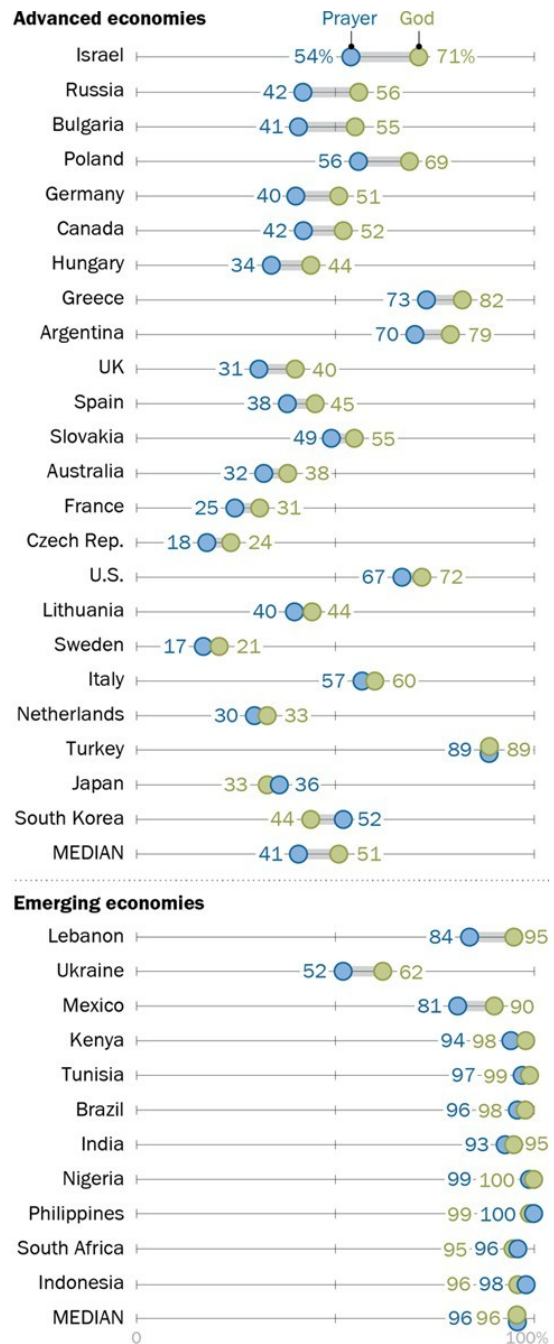
### **More say God plays an important role in life than say the same about prayer**

When asked separate questions about the roles that prayer and God play in their lives, more respondents say that God is important than say that prayer is important, though strong majorities in half of the countries surveyed say that both are important to them. Across 34 countries, a median of 61% say that God plays an important role in their lives, compared with 53% who say that prayer is important in their daily life.

Just as respondents in wealthier countries

tend to disagree that it is necessary to believe in God to be a moral person, people in wealthier countries generally say that God and prayer are not especially important in their lives (For more on advanced and emerging economies, see [Appendix B](#)). People in emerging economies are more than twice as likely as people in advanced economies to agree that prayer is an important part of daily life. Nine-in-ten or more respondents in all the emerging economies surveyed (except for Ukraine) say that God plays an important role in their lives. By contrast, less than half of respondents in 11 of the economically advanced countries surveyed consider God to be important in life. Similarly, while a median of 41% across these advanced economies say that prayer is an important part of daily life, 96% of those in emerging economies say that it is.

In some countries, respondents are less likely to say that prayer is an important part of daily life



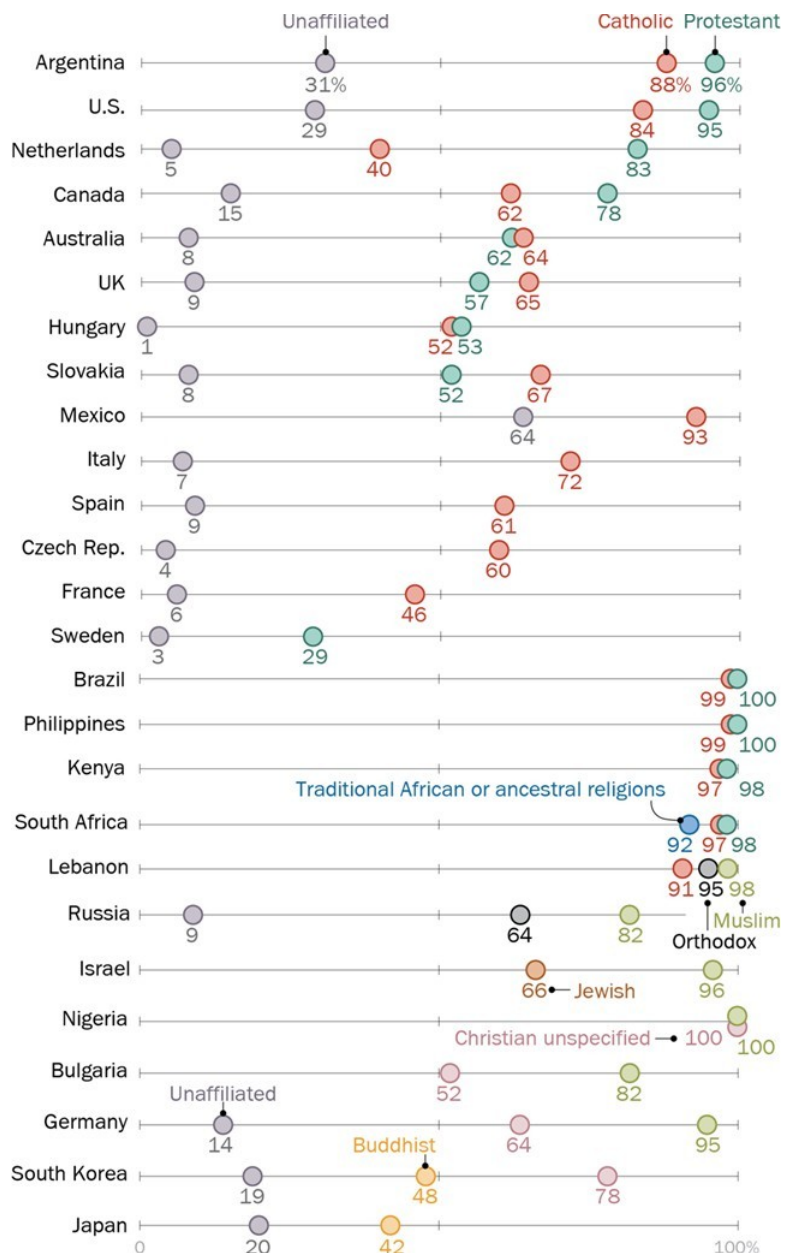
than they are to say that God is important in their lives. For example, 71% of Israeli respondents say that God is important in their life, while 54% say the same about prayer. Muslim Israelis drive much of this sentiment. Among Muslim Israelis, 96% say God is important in their life, compared with 66% of Jewish Israelis; 81% of Muslim Israelis say prayer is important, compared with 50% of Jewish Israelis.

Views on whether God plays an important role in life differ substantially based on religious affiliation as well. Not surprisingly, in most countries relatively few religiously unaffiliated people (those who say they are atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular”) agree that God is important in their lives. Still, around three-in-ten religiously unaffiliated people in Argentina and the U.S. say that God plays an important role in their lives.

There is near unanimous agreement that God is important in life among people of all major religious affiliations in Brazil, the

### Religiously unaffiliated people are much less inclined to see God as important in their lives

% who say God plays an important role in their life



Philippines and Kenya, as well as among all Muslim and Christian respondents in Nigeria.

## The rising significance of God after the dissolution of the Soviet Union

Following [well-documented trends](#) that trace the decline of Christianity in Western Europe, the share of Europeans who say that God plays an important role in life has declined since 1991. Spain, Italy and Poland had the most dramatic decreases, with declines of 26, 21 and 14 percentage points, respectively. This trend is mirrored in many other European countries, including Lithuania. Since the collapse of the USSR, Lithuania has seen a 12 percentage point drop in the share of its public that feels God plays an important role in their lives.

At the same time, other former Soviet republics where religion was harshly repressed or [effectively banned](#) during the Soviet period have experienced an *increase* in the percentage of people who say God plays an important role in life. Both Ukraine and Russia have experienced double-digit increases in the share of people who agree that God is important to them. In Bulgaria, a former satellite state of the

USSR, 41% said in 1991 that God was important in their lives. Today, a majority of Bulgarian respondents (55%) express that view.

Similar trends hold for those who say prayer is an important part of their daily lives.

### Importance of God has declined in many European nations since 1991, but has increased in former Soviet Union

*% who say God plays an important role in their life*

	1991	2019	Change
	%	%	
Spain	71	45	<b>-26</b>
Italy	81	60	<b>-21</b>
Poland	83	69	<b>-14</b>
France	43	31	<b>-12</b>
Lithuania	56	44	<b>-12</b>
UK	48	40	<b>-8</b>
Czech Rep.	30	24	<b>-6</b>
Slovakia	60	55	-5
Hungary	45	44	-1
Germany	48	51	+3
Ukraine	50	62	<b>+12</b>
Bulgaria	41	55	<b>+14</b>
Russia	40	56	<b>+16</b>

Note: Statistically significant differences shown in bold.

Source: Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey. Q66b.

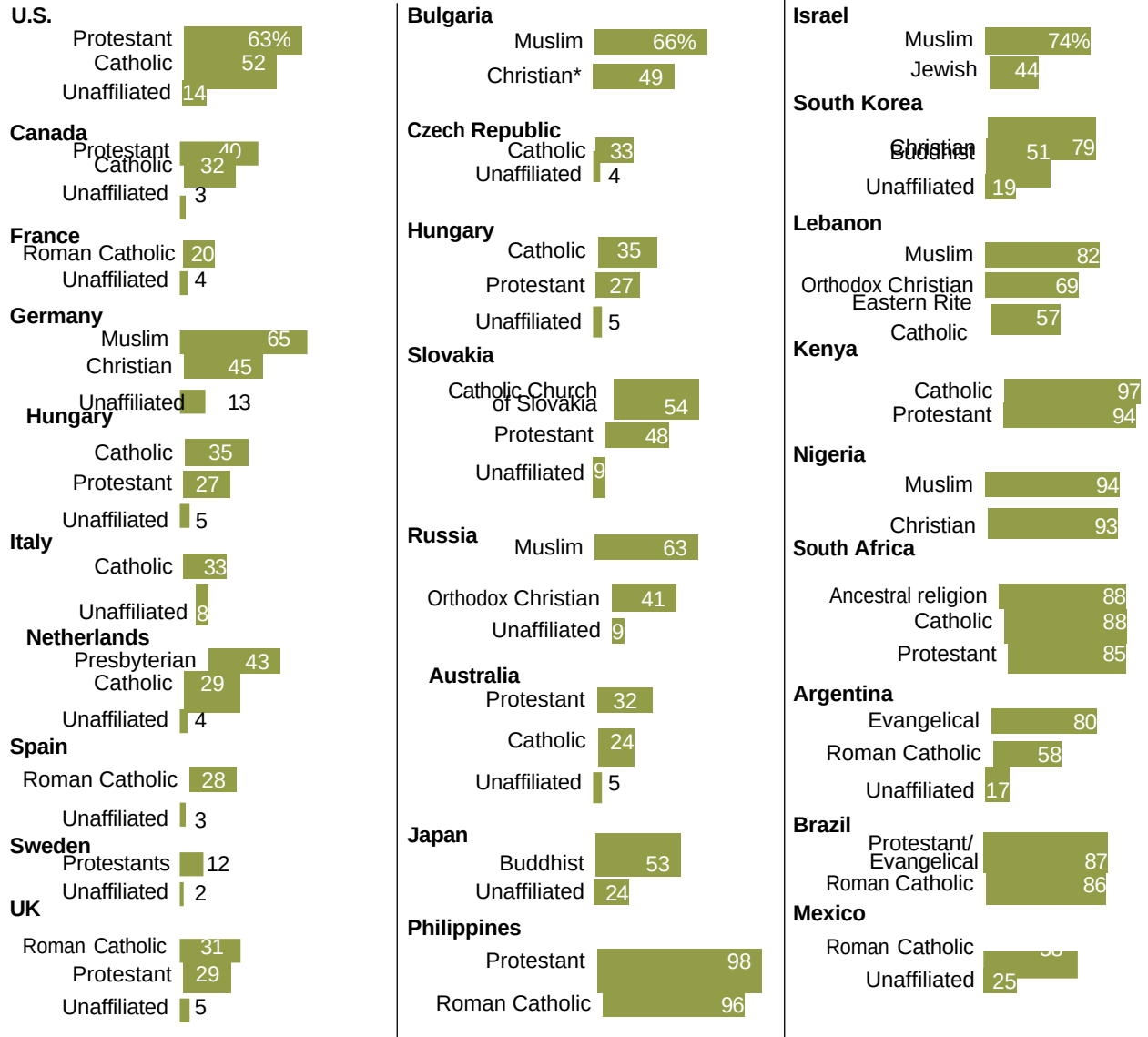
PEW RESEARCH CENTER



# Appendix A: Connection between God and morality by religious affiliation

## Morality and belief in God by religious affiliation

% who say it is necessary to believe in God in order to be moral and have good values



\* Christian includes Orthodox.  
Source: Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey. Q30.

There are differences by religious affiliation in many countries on whether it is necessary to believe in God in order to be moral and have good values.

While majorities in three of Lebanon's largest religious groups (Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Eastern Rite Catholics) see belief in God as essential to be moral, a larger majority of Lebanese Muslims (82%) than Eastern Rite Catholics (57%) share this view. Additionally, there are large differences by religion in Israel. Over seven-in-ten Muslims in the country say it is necessary to believe in God to have good values, while only 44% of Jewish respondents say the same.

Respondents in the three African countries surveyed say that belief in God is important for morals and values, regardless of religious affiliation. In Nigeria, similar shares of Christians (93%) and Muslims (94%) say belief in God is necessary to be moral and have good values. This pattern holds in Kenya, where similar shares of Protestants and Catholics (94% and 97%, respectively) share this view. In South Africa, 85% of Protestants and 88% of both Catholics and those of traditional African or ancestral religions say it is necessary.