

“What research at the intersection of religion and demography would you like to see?”

To: Conrad Hackett, associate director of research and senior demographer, Pew Research Center. (expertise in international religious demography, sociology of religion, and how religion relates to characteristics including gender, fertility and education)

Subject: “What research at the intersection of religion and demography would you like to see?”  
(re: tweet on November 19, 2018 on Twitter Platform)

From: Stefan Pasti, founder and resource coordinator, The Community Peacebuilding and Cultural Sustainability (CPCS) Initiative (at [www.cpcsi.org](http://www.cpcsi.org) )

### Introduction

I appreciate your reaching out on Twitter with the question “What research at the intersection of religion and demography would you like to see?”

I have had a long interest in questionnaires and surveys. My interest is along the lines of the following quote: “Organizations and communities of people often use questionnaires and surveys to identify problems and solutions, and to build consensus for collective action”. I intended the questions I am sharing with you in this response to be part of a larger questionnaire which would be administered to 150 key leaders (from a variety of fields of activity), in a specific community or region. The whole questionnaire or survey would help people in the community become more aware of challenges which needed attending to, and help them see the need for Community Visioning Initiatives and Neighborhood Learning Centers, as a means of clarifying the community’s perception of what the most critical challenges are, and clarifying what solutions would be most effective in resolving such challenges.

Most or all of the questions I offer below (in response to your question) might need help with the structuring of the question, but I would be most interested if some of them were administered in some form (especially since there does not now exist ways and means to administer such questions to relevant sample populations around the world). [Note: I share these questions with you (and with other people who might read this) with no need for compensation, as I would feel it compensation enough if the questions were used to some good purpose.] I can imagine interesting comparisons on these questions between responders from different religions in a specific country; from country to country, among the same religious affiliations; or just comparing responders from all affiliations from country to country. All that would be up to whoever used the questions.

Below is my list of research at the intersection of religion and demography that I would like to see (which translates into 32 questions).

A. Rate your agreement questions

Note: while the “agree-disagree” scale would be a good choice for most of the questions below, some of the questions might provide more interesting data if the following scale was used--

I believe it-- and there is much evidence to support it	I believe it-- and there is sufficient evidence to support it	I would like to believe it, but there isn't much evidence to support it	It is difficult to believe it, with the way things are going now	I don't believe it— there is no evidence to support it
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for which I include the following:

Your different view, or different way of understanding our present circumstances:

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- 1) It is possible to create, support, and sustain communities which can minimize resource requirements, maintain ecological sustainability, maintain a high level of compassion for fellow human beings—and which represent what a significant majority of community residents surveyed would describe as a high quality of life.
- 2) "... every article in the market has moral and spiritual values attached to it...."
- 3) "A certain degree of comfort is necessary, but... the satisfaction of one's physical needs must at a certain point come to a dead stop before it degenerates into physical decadence." (quote is from Mahatma Gandhi)
- 4) "It would be foolish to underestimate the challenge of checking the consumption juggernaut...." (quote is from Christopher Flavin, former president of WorldWatch Institute)
- 5) People who are not sufficiently informed about critical issues are everywhere, and they are investing their time, energy, and money—voting—all the time.

6) “The tendency of untrained minds is to adapt to their environment at the expense of their spiritual aspirations”. (quote is from Jonathan Roof in “Pathways to God”)

7) Consider the following excerpts from a book on Media Literacy:

“Media literate individuals have learned to develop a critical distance from the information they receive through the media, so that they are in a position to make independent judgments about 1) what programming they choose to watch, read, or hear 2) how to interpret the information that they receive through the channels of communication.” (p. 7)

“The educational system of a country plays a significant role in an individual’s selection and use of the media. A country’s educational curriculum—what subjects students are exposed to—affects their ability to interpret the information being conveyed through the channels of mass media.” (p. 157)

“Popular programming reflects a level of acceptance and shared values among large numbers of people. People tend to watch programs that meet their approval. If they are truly offended by violent programs, they would not watch them. In that sense, media programming can be regarded as a text that reflects the attitudes, values, behaviors, preoccupations, and myths that define a culture.” (p. 66)

“At the same time, media programming reinforces cultural attitudes, values, behaviors, preoccupations, and myths. Media messages are communicated through the countless hours of media programming that repeat, directly or indirectly, the cultural script.” (p. 68)

“Finally, the media do not merely reflect or reinforce culture, but in fact shape attitudes, values, behavior, preoccupations, and myths.” (p. 68)

“The ability to identify and evaluate propaganda messages undermines the central persuasive function of propaganda by empowering individuals to develop independent judgments about the messages they receive through the media. However, developing an awareness of propaganda is not an easy task...”

[All excerpts above are from “International Communications: A Media Literacy Approach” by Art Silverblatt and Nikolai Zlobin M.E. Sharpe July, 2004 (most content accessible at Google Books)]

Now that you have considered the above excerpts from a book on Media Literacy, please rate the following two statements, on a scale of “Strongly Agree—Strongly Disagree”.

Statement a): We need education which includes students learning the ability to “interpret the information that they receive through the channels of communication” and “develop independent judgments about the messages they receive through the media”

Statement b): We need a more simplified/less complex social and cultural environment, so that the need for students to learn the ability to “interpret the information that they receive through the channels of communication” and “develop independent judgments about the messages they receive through the media” is less necessary than it is now, in our complex cultural landscapes.

8) Most people would consider it unusual for a person to request to be excused from military service based on their religious, spiritual, or moral convictions.

9) The challenges of our times are such that it is now critical for us to access the storehouses of wisdom which have accumulated over the many centuries of human experience, and which have been confirmed again and again as essential to individual well-being and social harmony by the saints, sages, spiritual leaders, and sincere practitioners of all religious, spiritual, and moral traditions.

10) There is a profound and critical need for as many people as possible to be exercising as much love, understanding, and forgiveness as possible—in as many ways as possible.

11) There is now a great responsibility on people who are in any way representatives of religious, spiritual, and/or moral traditions—to demonstrate what is possible along the lines of wisdom and compassion, to provide genuine instruction when sincere efforts are being made, to contribute to the greater good of the whole, and to help restore confidence in the higher values of life.

12) God can do anything.

## B. Open-ended Questions

Note: While modern compiling, analysis, and presentation methods seem to require mostly multiple choice questions, I do wish there were more open-ended questions (especially since opinions and views on complex subjects are much needed to arrive at collaboration on complex problems)

1) What are the most difficult challenges (challenges which will need to be resolved for a majority of the people in the world) during the next 20 years?

a) Can you name any Experienced Practitioners, who are most qualified to be educating people on how to successfully overcome each of the ten challenges you identified?

2) What is your definition of “the good life?”

3) During the course of any given day, each of us consciously or unconsciously places our faith in a variety of people, institutions, organizations, businesses, beliefs, principles, practices, commonly agreed upon codes of conduct, etc.

Consider carefully the ‘things you do in the everyday circumstances of your life’— and then list 10 people, institutions, etc. which you personally place your faith in. Then, please mark or arrange the list so that #1 is the most significant person, institution, etc which you personally place your faith in, #2 is the second most significant, and so on.

4) Who are the most valuable peacebuilders in your local community?

Please name 5-10 people you would identify to others as the most valuable peacebuilders, and then please describe 5 qualities, skills, experiences, knowledge, etc. which you believe are essential to identifying someone as a most valuable peacebuilder.

5) Please consider the community of believers or adherents you are a part of—specifically the one which you are a part of, in the place where you live. When the conduct or manner of living of a member of your specific community gives cause for concern, how does your specific community—as a group—respond?

6) Question a) In your opinion, what percentage of people in the “geographical range” which makes up your larger community or region have a “moral compass” which is relevant to the challenges of our times... with “relevant” meaning that people who have such a “moral compass” can--and do-- use such a “moral compass” regularly to make wise choices regarding the investments they make of time, energy, and money in the everyday circumstances of their daily lives?

Now... consider the following Survey Project (which has not been carried out anywhere):

A very careful and conscientious approach is made towards identifying critical challenges and solution-oriented activity (by surveys key leaders from a variety of fields of activity), for a specific community or region, and comparing that input with working definitions for “right livelihood” and “moral compasses” (created by a committee representative of the whole community or region). The purpose would be to increase the reliability of the “moral compasses” of the people in that community or region.

Question b): In your opinion, would such a survey project as described above increase the reliability of the “moral compasses” of the people in that community or region?

7) Consider what you believe are the five most difficult conflicts in the world today... and then consider the five most difficult personal relationships you have (relationships which are ongoing, relationships which somehow require your involvement on a regular basis, etc.)

Question: How could the people associated with the conflicts ultimately be helped so that they could live harmoniously with each other? Please offer any and all responses which you believe might be helpful to other people, and group your responses in two categories, according to the two scenarios you were asked to consider above.

8) Consider the following proposition: The investments of time, energy, and money (the “votes”) each of us make in our everyday circumstances can result in countless ways of earning a living which contribute to--rather than impair--the peacebuilding, community revitalization, and ecological sustainability efforts necessary to reach positive tipping points on many critical challenges at the same time.

Question: Would people who are actualizing the proposition in the above statement (in a positive way, in their local community), only be right in doing so if they were attributing their work to the God you believe in?

9) Consider what ways of earning a living you would identify as “right livelihood.” Now imagine a local community resource guide relating to employment, apprenticeships, training, and volunteer opportunities associated with “right livelihood.” And further: imagine a committee commissioned to produce such a “right livelihood” resource guide... and the individuals who make up the committee commissioned to produce such a resource guide.

Question a): What background (qualifications, experiences, etc.) would you like such individuals to have?

Question b): What local institutions would you consider most appropriate to commission such a resource guide, and oversee its production?

10) “During World War II, all registrants (in the United States) were sent a questionnaire covering basic facts about their identification, physical condition, history and also provided a checkoff to indicate opposition to military service because of religious training or belief. Men marking the latter option received a DSS 47 form with ten questions, which included variations of the following three questions:

a) If circumstances arose which required you to choose, would you choose to be opposed to military service or participation in local militia because of your religious training or beliefs?

- b) If you did choose to be opposed to military service or participation in local militia because of religious training or belief, please describe the beliefs you have which support why you would make that choice.
- c) Please describe the actions and behavior in your life which in your opinion most conspicuously demonstrates the consistency and depth of your religious convictions.

[The above quote, and three of the ten questions, was accessed maybe six years ago from the Wikipedia webpage for “Conscientious Objector”. However, only an incomplete excerpt is now accessible at the Wikipedia webpage for “Conscientious Objection in the United States” (in World War II section). The source reference given there for the text they used is “Service for Peace, A History of Mennonite Civilian Public Service” by Melvin Gingerich Mennonite Central Committee, 1949]

### C. Fill in the Blank Questions

1) Please “brainstorm” on the subject of what would best fill in the blank in the above statement. Then choose 5-10 items from the “brainstormed list”, and rank them according to most important, and next most important, using 1 as most important, 2 as next most important, and so on.

a) The person who will help me the most is the person who will \_\_\_\_\_.

b) If only there was a way to \_\_\_\_\_

c) In the best of times, even the most profound challenges can be overcome; for in the best of times, \_\_\_\_\_ is/are nurtured, supported, and sustained by family, teachers, mentors, elders, and the everyday influences of community life and cultural traditions.

d) “The most advanced societies are the ones which are successful at \_\_\_\_\_.”