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Most Americans Believe in Higher Power, Poll Finds

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Most Americans believe that angels and demons are active in the world, and nearly 80 percent think miracles occur, according to a poll released yesterday that takes an in-depth look at Americans' religious beliefs.

The study detailed Americans' deep and broad religiosity, finding that 92 percent believe in God or a universal spirit -- including one in five of those who call themselves atheists. More than half of Americans polled pray at least once a day.

But Americans aren't rigid about their beliefs. Most of those studied -- even many of the most religiously conservative -- have a remarkably nonexclusive attitude toward other faiths. Seventy percent of those affiliated with a religion believe that many religions can lead to eternal salvation. And only about one-quarter of those surveyed believe there is only one way to interpret their religion's teachings.

"Even though Americans tend to take religion quite seriously and are a highly religious people, there is a certain degree of openness and a lack of dogmatism in their approach to faith and the teachings of their faith," said Gregory Smith, a research fellow at the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

A belief in God or a higher spirit is pervasive. Even Americans who describe themselves as atheist or agnostic have a robust sense of a higher power: Twenty-one percent of those who describe themselves as atheists expressed a belief in God or a universal spirit, and more than half of those who call themselves agnostic expressed a similar conviction.

Smith said some people may identify with the term *atheist* or *agnostic* without fully understanding the definition, or they have a negative view of organized religion, even though they believe in God.

[David Phillips](#), 57, a Bethesda receiving clerk who considers himself a humanist -- meaning he does not embrace the concept of a supernatural being -- does not believe in a God who is an "actual person." But Phillips does believe in a "spirit -- a spirit within you."

"God is a symbol that everybody can relate to," Phillips said. "They look to it as a visual thing. But, actually, God is inside of them."

This is the second report from the think tank, based on one of the largest polls of Americans' religious beliefs ever conducted, with 36,000 adults interviewed.

The first report, released in February, took a broad look at religion in America. This report delves into the faith and politics of religious and nonreligious Americans.

For many Americans, God is a vivid presence. About one-third of the people surveyed said they receive answers to their prayer requests at least once a month and say they have experienced or witnessed a divine healing of an illness or injury.

"I can't remember any prayer that I have prayed that has not been answered," said Helen Catchings, 62, of Vienna. God cured her of stuttering and gave her the resources for her home-care business, she said. And she

said she has seen members of her church cured of cancer, brain tumors and other illnesses through prayer, baffling doctors. "I give Him all the credit," Catchings said.

Much of the strong belief in the supernatural is being driven by the growth in Pentecostalism and charismatic churches, said [John Green](#), a Pew senior fellow in religion and American politics. Pentecostals and charismatics practice what they regard as the gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues and praying for miraculous healing.

The report found that almost one in five Christians speaks or prays in tongues -- ecstatic worship or prayer using unintelligible speech -- from time to time, with 9 percent speaking in tongues weekly.

At Greater Mount Calvary Holy Church in the District, a Pentecostal church, worshipers say that they speak in tongues frequently and that it brings them closer to God.

D.C. college student Star Alston said her prayer life includes speaking in tongues in church and at home. "It's not planned and not anything where anyone gives me a cue and says, 'Do it,' " she said. "It just comes when I feel that God is with me."

On the political front, the Pew report found that across the faiths, those who pray more are more politically conservative.

Among Jews who pray daily, 36 percent are politically conservative -- more than twice the percentage of those who pray less often. Among evangelical Christians, 56 percent who pray daily are politically conservative, compared with 40 percent who pray less often.

The report also found agreement among the most and least faithful on hot-button issues. It confirms that those who attend church and pray frequently are most likely to oppose abortion and believe that homosexuality should be discouraged.

Less of a divide was found on other issues. More than 60 percent of Americans, for example, want the government to do more to help the needy and support stronger environmental laws. And majorities in most religions believe that the United States should concentrate on problems at home.

"We think of religion as the basis for so much political conflict, but it's important to remember that there are large issue areas within American politics where religiously based differences tend to be small," Smith said.

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