

Growth in secular attitudes leaves Americans room for belief in God

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(PhysOrg.com) -- The nature of the American religious experience is changing as a rising number of people report having no formal religious affiliation, even though the number of Americans who say they pray is increasing, according to a new survey from the University of Chicago.

Those twin trends suggest a growing number of people are “spiritual but not religious,” the study author said. The report, “[Religious Change Around the World](#),” found that in addition to an increased number of people who pray, a growing number believe in the afterlife. When asked how they view God, the most common responses were the traditional images of father and judge.

Sociologists of religion say the rise in people who are spiritual but religiously uncommitted is prompting churches to repackage their services into more contemporary offerings with fresh, livelier music and less of the usual liturgies.

“Americans’ attitudes toward religion are growing more complex,” said study author Tom W. Smith, Director of the General Social Survey at the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. “While fewer people identify with a particular religion, belief in God remains high.

“When asked simply about belief in God, most people include a range of God images, from a personal God to believing in a ‘higher power’ or a ‘spirit or life force,’” he said. People who don’t believe in a personal God

but in a higher power of some kind rose from 5 percent in 1964 to 9 to 10 percent in recent surveys, the study found.

The report is the latest product of the General Social Survey, the nation's longest, most scientifically reliable source of information on American attitudes and behaviors. Supported by the National Science Foundation, the survey is widely used by social scientists for their research.

In the United States, belief in God has ebbed over time from about 99 percent in the 1950s to about 92 percent at present. Certitude about God also has diminished, but the vast majority of Americans still express a strong and close connection to God.

"People's images of God are diverse, but they lean toward the traditional," Smith said. The GSS has asked people for their images of God since 1984, and about half of the people have consistently referred to God as "father," while others used terms like "master" or "judge" to describe their idea of God. The number reporting God as "mother" has stayed at about 3 percent.

Although belief in God remains strong, the survey found that 22 percent of people said they had never attended a religious service, compared with 9 percent in 1972. The trends toward reduced church attendance began in the mid-1980s, and by the mid-1990s, fewer people reported identifying with a particular religion. In the most recent survey, 16 percent of people reported "none" when asked about their religious preference, a figure that stood at 5 to 8 percent in surveys taken between 1972 and 1991.

Daily prayer rose from 52 percent in the 1989-90 survey to 59 percent in the most recent survey. Belief in the afterlife also went up modestly, from 69 percent in 1973 to 73 percent in most recent surveys.

“The number of people identifying as ‘spiritual, but not religious’ has been growing perhaps for three decades. This of course has implications for traditional religious institutions, which may feel pressure to revitalize or altogether repackaging their spiritual offerings,” said Omar M.

McRoberts, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago and Co-Chair of the Working Group on Spirituality, Political Engagement and Public Life at the Social Science Research Council.

“We should not assume, however, that ‘spiritual’ people are individualists who avoid participation in general,” McRoberts said. “Rather we should look carefully for new forms of spiritual sociability emerging in the religious field, and new ways of expressing spiritual values in the public realm.”

The study found religious participation to be strongest among older people. Future research will determine whether today’s younger generation becomes more religious as it ages or retains its secular orientation, Smith said.

Religious participation elsewhere in the world also represents a complex picture, an examination of worldwide surveys shows. In Muslim countries, belief in God remains strong, while in secular nations in Western Europe it has been declining.

Although Communists discouraged religious belief in Eastern Europe, belief in [God](#) has rebounded in some countries in that region. That follows a pattern of resilience that researchers have found in many parts of the world.

“After decades of repression by anti-religionist, authoritarian regimes, in the face of national tragedies, and following serious self-inflicted harm from moral failures by religious leaders, religion has shown the ability to rebound,” he said.

Provided by University of Chicago ([news](#) : [web](#))

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