

Belief in God rises with age, even in atheist nations

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(Phys.org) -- International surveys about the depth of people's belief in God reveal vast differences among nations, ranging from 94 percent of people in the Philippines who said they always believed in God, compared to only 13 percent of people in the former East Germany. Yet the surveys found one constant—belief in God is higher among older

people, regardless of where they live.

A new report on the international surveys, “[Belief](#) About [God](#) Across Time and Countries,” was issued by the General Social Survey of the social science research organization NORC at the University of Chicago. It is based on a comprehensive, international study of belief in God and includes information from the International Social Survey Program, a consortium of the world’s leading opinion survey organizations. Tom W. Smith, director of the General [Social Survey](#), wrote the report.

The data came from 30 countries in which surveys about belief in God have been taken, in some cases, since 1991. Researchers asked questions to determine people’s range of beliefs, from atheism to strong belief in God; their changing beliefs over their lifetime; and their attitude toward the notion that God is concerned with individuals.

Belief in God varies widely across nations, cultures

Countries with the strongest belief in God tended to be Catholic societies, especially in the developing world, such as the Philippines. The people of the [United States](#) stood out for their high in belief in God among developed countries with large Protestant populations. Competition among denominations may account for that interest in religion, Smith said.

The surveys found:

- Atheism is strongest in northwest European countries such as Scandinavia and the former Soviet states (except for Poland). The former East Germany had the highest rate of people who said they never believed in God (59 percent); in comparison, 4 percent of Americans had that response.

- The country with the strongest belief is the Philippines, where 94 percent of those surveyed said they always had believed in God. In the United States, that response came from 81 percent of people surveyed.
- Although by most measures, belief in God is gradually declining worldwide, it is increasing in Russia, Slovenia and Israel. In Russia, comparing the difference between those who believe in God but hadn't previously, and those who don't believe in God but used to, researchers found a 16 percent change in favor of belief.
- Support for the concept that God is concerned with people in a personal way ranged from 8 percent in the former East Germany to 82 percent in the Philippines. In the United States, 68 percent of people surveyed held that view.

“Belief in God has decreased in most countries, but the declines are quite modest especially when calculated on a per annum basis,” Smith said.

The constant: Belief in God grows with age

Belief is highest among older adults. On average, 43 percent of those aged 68 and older are certain that God exists, compared with 23 percent of those 27 and younger, according to the report.

Many sociologists who have studied people's beliefs in God over time contend that there is a cohort effect; young people who are more likely to doubt God's existence carry their disbelief with them as they age, meaning that societies as a whole are tending to become more secular. But the NORC study suggests it's possible instead that people change their beliefs over time.

“Looking at differences among age groups, the largest increases in belief in God most often occur among those 58 years of age and older. This

suggests that belief in God is especially likely to increase among the oldest groups, perhaps in response to the increasing anticipation of mortality,” Smith said. He noted that the higher level of belief does not appear to be simply a cohort effect.

In the United States, for instance, 54 percent of people younger than 28 said they were certain of God’s existence, compared with 66 percent of the people 68 and older.

In countries with low overall belief in God, the difference in belief between age groups is also strong. In France, for example, 8 percent of younger people said they were certain that God exists, compared with 26 percent of the people 68 and older. In Austria, 8 percent of the younger generation said they were certain in their belief, while 32 percent of people 68 and older were confident of God’s existence.

The surveys were taken in 1991, 1998 and 2008, when 42 countries were surveyed. The study was done on countries that had been surveyed at least twice.

Provided by University of Chicago

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