

# Keeping the Faith

*Looking at God through America's eyes*

By George Gallup, Jr.

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Throughout the ages there have been no more fundamental questions demanding responses than: "Is there a God?" "Who or what is this God?" "Why should people believe in this God?"

Every human being, in varying ways and degrees, seeks to answer these questions. Their responses can be of profound significance for themselves and the societies in which they live.

Seeking God or meaning in life is the one thing that unites all people. "The great question of life," writes Stephen D. Schwartz in *The Intellectuals Speak Out About God*, "is whether it is ultimately meaningful or ultimately absurd.... Belief in God is not one belief among others; it is basic, fundamental to the way one lives one's life. It is a way of looking at our being, and all of reality, namely as having a value and significance beyond what will be destroyed by death, or by cosmic forces."

Reading the "signs of the times" through scientific surveys, it would appear that these three questions about God (or a universal spirit) are being asked at this point in history with renewed purposefulness and intensity. The percentage of Americans who seek spiritual growth in their daily lives has soared to 85%. An upward trend is evident in those who say they have thought *a lot* about their relationship to God, with 6 in 10 doing so today.

Growing numbers, furthermore, say they have given a lot of thought to developing their faith, as well as to the basic meaning and value of their lives.

There is, in short, ample survey evidence to show an unprecedented search for spiritual moorings in America today, and an ever-growing hunger for God. "This impulse to know and name God is beautiful," writes Diedre Sullivan.

When Americans think about spirituality, most of those surveyed consider it more in a personal and individual sense than in terms of organized religion and church doctrine. They may define it as "something beyond oneself;" "a sense of awe and mystery in the universe;" "seeking the inner self;" "reaching human potential;" "a mystical bond with other people;" or "a calmness in my life."

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*George Gallup, Jr., is co-chairman, the Gallup Organization.*

A recent Gallup Poll found 54% of Americans describing themselves as "religious" while 30% said they would define themselves as "spiritual but not religious." Even 20% of those who said religion is very important in their daily lives defined themselves as spiritual but not religious. Furthermore, religious faith in America today appears to be a kind of smorgasbord affair, with people picking and choosing from various religious and spiritual movements that best serve them, individually.

Why is it important to record through surveys the beliefs of populaces on these three questions? The answers come under three headings:

*Sociological:* To understand America one needs to be aware of and appreciate the religious underpinnings of our society.

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*Practical:* Clergy and religious leaders of all faiths need this basic information so they can lead people to deeper levels of commitment.

*Theological:* If one rejects a “reductionist” approach (one that explains away God), then surveys can shed light on human responses to God, and thereby possibly provide at least some insight into God’s purposes for humankind.

**N**ever in the 65-year history of scientific polling have Americans been in such agreement on a belief and held it so steadily as they have their belief in God or a universal spirit. In a national Gallup Poll in 1947, 94% said they believed in God. In a survey conducted for the Templeton Foundation more than 50 years later, 95% said they believed in God or a universal spirit. Between these two dates, the figure has varied by no more than a point or two from survey to survey.

Nothing in the last half-century has dislodged the conviction of Americans that there is a power in the universe that is greater than ourselves—not wars; not the problem of evil and

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the obvious sufferings of innocent people; not the “death of God” movement; not social upheavals nor the lures of the modern world.

Belief in God is pervasive in America. Large majorities in every region of the country, in all walks of life, and at each level of formal education express belief in a power behind the universe.

More than a century ago Karl Marx wrote that religion was the opiate of the masses, and that it would fade away as the level of education increased. Time, of course, has proven Marx wrong. A large majority of Americans, and indeed the people of the world, continue to believe in a supreme being or universal spirit.

But what do people believe about God? Is God, in people’s minds, simply a philosophical concept, some form of energy, an impersonal force—or is this God a living personal God who seeks to enter the lives of human beings, and to listen to their prayers?

The fact is, Americans claim a remarkably high level of intimacy with the Divine. Almost nine out of 10 Americans (86%) say they believe in God, even when given the choice of saying they “don’t believe in God, but believe in a universal spirit or higher power” (chosen by only 8%). In fact, only 5% of the population choose neither of these choices and thus claim a more straightforward atheistic position.

Most people (9 in 10) believe that God loves them. Far from thinking of God as a remote being, 85% say God still performs miracles today, and 84% think God is actively involved in their lives.

Further evidence of the widespread belief that there is a personal God, active in the lives of humans, is the finding that 6 in 10 believe God gives them strength to deal with problems, and to draw upon inner powers they believe God has given them. Less abstractly, 28% maintain that God or Jesus Christ or a higher power intervenes directly in their lives. Only one person in 10 feels God is not involved in our affairs this way, that it is strictly a case of mind over matter.

**A** solid majority of Americans say they receive a great deal of comfort and support from their belief in God. Two in three (68%) say it is completely true that they believe “God loves me even though I may not always please Him.” Many feel that God has a plan for their lives, and strive to understand His will through prayer.

Other findings, however, challenge the notion of the seeming centrality of God in people’s lives. While two-thirds (64%) of adults in a 1981 survey conducted for the Robert Schuller

Ministries said their “relation to God or a universal spirit” is very important to their basic sense of worth as a person, greater proportions cited “their family” (93%) or “their moral standards” (75%). Comparable proportions named “their close friends” (62%) and their “attempt to fulfill their potential as a person” (60%).

Sixty-one percent considered it very important to “follow God’s will,” but greater importance was placed on eight other social values (see Figure 1).

Further, many Americans grapple with existential quandaries as they search for spiritual certainty. In a 1981 survey for the Christian Broadcasting Network, an effort was made to explore the stumbling blocks to belief in God. A national cross-section of Americans were asked what question they would most like to ask God. Here are the top ten they offered:

- Why is there still suffering in the world?
- Will there ever be a cure for all diseases?
- Why is there evil in the world?
- Will there ever be lasting world peace?
- Will man ever love his fellow man?
- When will the world end?
- What does the future hold for me and my family?
- Is there life after death?
- What is Heaven like?
- How can I be a better person?

These findings offer a backdrop to the reasons people give for believing in God or an ultimate spirit.

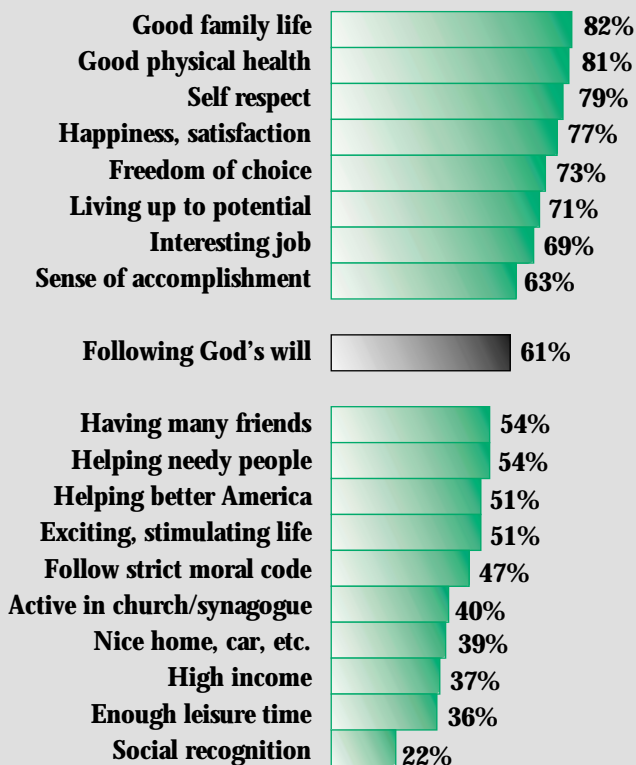
A review of the literature on this topic, and an assessment of Gallup findings, including recent interviews, reveals four broad categories of response: authoritative, rational, empirical and utilitarian. The categories reflect, to some degree, the classic arguments given for belief in God by theologians, philosophers and others. Although rational and empirical arguments are given more often than authoritative or utilitarian ones, there is a great deal of overlap among these four, with one argument often used to buttress another.

Authoritative statements attribute belief in the existence of God to some form of authority, such as the Bible (or some

Figure 1

## Priorities in Order

**Question:** ... [P]lease tell me how important you feel each of these is to you [using a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being extremely unimportant and 10 being extremely important].



**Note:** Fifty-two percent in the same survey said they would feel very bad (the top position on a five-point scale) if they felt they had disobeyed God. But higher proportions cited “not being able to pay bills” (65%), “getting a divorce” (62%), and “being tempted into doing something immoral” (57%). Similar proportions cited “feeling you had let someone down who had been counting on you” (55%), “not being able to buy something for a loved one who really needed it” (55%), “losing your job” (53%), and “having an abortion” (52%).

**Source:** Survey by the Gallup Organization, December 11-14, 1981.

aspect of the Bible) or to upbringing or religious training in the home, church or school. Others cite the universality of belief throughout the ages.

Said one young man: “I have never questioned why I believe in God, just as I don’t question why the sky happens to be blue. Each of these truths is beyond my comprehension or control. I believe in God because He has allowed it. For that gift I will be eternally grateful.”

Some respondents in this group cite the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as their “authority.” For Christians, who represent the largest religion in America, the orthodox belief is that the fullest revelation of God has been his invasion into history in the person of Jesus Christ.

**R**esponses in the rational category point to the order and majesty of the world around us as constituting proof of the existence of God, or to God as First Cause—that is, there must be a creator to explain the origin of humanity and the world. Here is what people say:

“The very beauty, order and diversity of life on earth could not have happened randomly. It could only be due to divine intervention....”

“The reason for God is all around us... that is, the orbit of planets around the sun, the enormous complexity of the human brain, etc., is very unlikely to have occurred by chance. Where there is a design, there is a designer....”

“Life is too complicated not to have God ‘running the show’—all the aspects of forming a living thing, whether it be animal or plant. Too many things have to go right to even begin a life form, let alone have it survive. There has to be a God to start and change and ‘run’ this or it would flop....”

Some in the rational group cite an inborn “moral law”—a belief that there are “absolutes,” certain things that are right or wrong regardless of circumstances.

**E**mpirical responses usually relate to the lives or experiences of the respondents. Many deal with deliverance from serious illness, and often, in the belief of the survey respondent, from death itself.

Answers in terms of help from prayer are common. Some see the reality of God’s existence in the profound changes that occur in the lives of other people.

The significance of empirical reasons as a factor in belief is seen in Gallup Poll findings that show 53% of Americans reporting they have had specific experiences that convinced them God exists. Findings such as these help explain why persons whose responses fall under the heading “empirical” tend to be the strongest believers in God. Here are sample responses:

“Yes, I do believe in a universal spirit. I believe because of how, when I need someone or something the most, it comes to me. Also, because of how knowledge that I need to have seems to arrive... just in time.”

“The universe is too great and wonderful to exist without the hand of God. Also God hears, understands, and answers our prayers—sometimes in ways we do not expect.”

“I believe that I have witnessed God’s love and intercession through people who have had a very significant impact on my life. People who offer love, comfort, and hope, I believe, are inspired by God, whether they realize it themselves or not. Most of all, I witnessed God’s power to erase human fears. As my husband was near death, he asked God for confidence and strength, and received both in abundance. To me, that was a miracle of God.”

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**F**inally, responses designated as utilitarian are oriented toward the practical, the pragmatic: “It is safer to believe than not to believe.” Basically, respondents in this group believe in God because they “need” something. They argue the existence of God for the necessity of having something to believe in and something to look forward to after death. Under this heading are responses indicating a “will to believe,” an ardent desire to accept what seems to be the most logical and meaningful factors for belief.

One male executive had this to say: “I believe in God because, when all is said and done, even science cannot supply the final link in the chain of how we came to be and why we are here. I could leave the final link to chance or I could ascribe some role to a supreme being. In the end, it is more comfortable to believe in a God than not to.”

And, in the end, perhaps it is those responses that are not easily categorized that best reflect the complexity of Americans’ incessant ponderings about the greatest truth of all. As one woman, a journalist in her thirties, put it, “I believe in God because it seems much more logical that the universe, with all its order and beauty, is the conception of a creative power, rather than [a] product... molded by physical or climatic accidents. To disbelieve truly seems to require a larger act of faith than to believe.”