

The Religious Worldview and American Beliefs About Human Origins

By George Bishop

Americans are reputedly among the most religious people in the developed world. Whether measured by belief in God and life after death, church attendance, or a host of other indicators, we appear to be a remarkably religious society:¹ 96% of us, for example, say we believe in “God, or a universal spirit,” according to the Gallup Organization’s most recent reading; about 75% believe in life after death; two-thirds say they belong to a church or synagogue though only about 38% attend weekly; and nearly nine out of ten (88%) report that religion is either “very” or “fairly” important in their lives.² Moreover, contrary to the “secularization thesis,” which predicts the inevitable decline of religion in modern nations, the beliefs and practices of Americans have remained relatively stable over the last half century or so.³ Yet with the possible exception of Ireland and Northern Ireland, the Gallup index of religiosity in the United States is noticeably higher than in any major European nation—with only one out of five in Denmark and Sweden, for example, professing belief in a personal God. Such is the staying power of religion in the United States, even when compared with our cultural neighbors to the north.⁴

“*Like other indicators of religiosity in our society, the distribution of Americans’ beliefs about human origins—creationist, theist, and Darwinist—has remained remarkably stable despite rising levels of education.*”

Religious Beliefs of American Scientists Are Stable But Contradictory

Perhaps even more remarkable is that belief in God over the past 80 years among American natural and physical scientists has been stable. Replicating a classic study by psychologist James Leuba in 1916, Edward Larson and Larry Witham found that the belief in a personal God has remained essentially unchanged, with about four out of ten (39%) randomly selected scientists in 1996 professing such a belief compared to about the same percentage (42%) in 1916.⁵ The levels of *disbelief* and *agnosticism* were also essentially the same in both periods (40-45% and 15%, respectively).

The belief in human immortality, however, has noticeably declined among scientists. In 1916 about half of the scientists surveyed (51%) said they held such a belief, whereas in 1996 the figure was 38%. In 1916 only one out of five scientists expressed outright disbelief in immortality, but in 1996 the percentage of non-believers had more than doubled to 47% (with agnostics’ opinions on immortality declining from 30% to 15% over time). Larson and Witham offer no explanation for these seemingly contradictory results. Nor are there any comparable trend data for the general public on these topics, as the questions they replicated from Leuba’s 1916 survey have never been asked in American public opinion polls and are not likely to be asked because their wording is archaic and complex.

Larson and Witham did, however, pose a question to their sample of scientists about a core belief in the religious worldview, namely belief about “creationism” versus the “evolution” of human life on Earth. This question has become central to the fundamentalist movement in modern American society, and there are comparable data for the general public. While a majority (55%) of scientists endorsed the Darwinian

position that “Humans developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life. God had no part in this process,” a surprisingly high percentage (40%) subscribed to the “theistic evolutionist” idea that “Humans developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God guided this process, including humankind’s creation.” Only 5% adopted the biblical, creationist position that “God created humans pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years”—a striking contrast to beliefs of the American public that have emerged in Gallup polls over the past couple of decades.⁶

Emergence of the Evolution Issue

Not until the late 1970s do we find any national or state data in the major survey archives on American beliefs about human evolution. The emergence of the issue appears to coincide with the rise of the “Moral Majority” and the creationist movement in the United States, and especially with the efforts of “scientific creationists” to have the biblical version of man’s creation included, or given equal time, in the science curriculum of public schools. To my knowledge, the first question on this topic in a national or state poll was asked in a Gallup survey in November 1978, sponsored by the evangelical periodical *Christianity Today*.⁷

This initial probe indicated that half of adult Americans believed in the literal, creationist account that “God created Adam and Eve, which was the start of human life”; one out of five believed He began the evolutionary life cycle and then intervened to create man in His own image; and about one out of ten (11%) thought He started the evolutionary cycle but did not intervene to create human beings. Only about one in five professed ignorance

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about the origin of humanity, either because they thought it was “unknown” (12%) or they just didn’t know (8%). Not surprisingly, these findings seem to reflect, in part, the presumably unintended influence of the research sponsor—*Christianity Today*—as the wording of the question was somewhat biased in the direction of supernatural creation or intervention.

Gallup and other pollsters didn’t begin asking questions about the issue of human origins with any frequency until 1981-82 during the height of the creation/evolution controversy in the US and during the Arkansas “equal time” trial. After experimenting with different question wordings on beliefs about human origins, Gallup settled (in July 1982) on a version which asks respondents to identify themselves as having one of three different views: “Which of the statements on this card comes closest to describing your views about the origin and development of man?”

A. *God created man pretty much in his present form at one time within the last 10,000 years.*

B. *Man has developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life. God had no part in this process.*

C. *Man has developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God guided this process, including man’s creation.”*

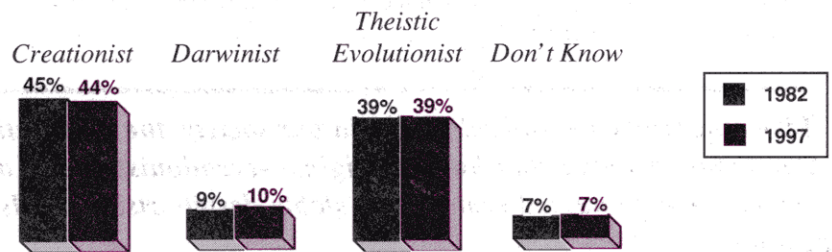
The first statement identifies the respondent with what is widely considered the “creationist” view, the second with what we will call the “Darwinist” position, and the third with what has come to be known as the “theistic evolutionist” perspective.

Much as with other indicators of the religious worldview in the US, there is little or no evidence of any change since the question was first asked 15 years ago (see Figure 1). Presently, the percentage of Americans who identify themselves with the biblical, creationist worldview is

about 44%; nearly 4 out of 10 (39%) subscribe to the theistic evolutionist view; and only one in ten endorses the Darwinist position of natural science despite the rising percentage of college graduates, a trend which might be expected to have reduced significantly the proportion of adults believing in biblical creationism. From 1982 to 1997 the percentage of those with less than a high school education in the Gallup samples dropped from 26% to 14%, while the percentage of those with at least some exposure to college, including college graduates, rose from 35% to 51%, a net shift of about 29%. And yet, as Andrew Greeley might have put it, rumors of a decline in the American religious worldview about human origins are greatly exaggerated.

Figure 1
Americans’ Religious Beliefs Remain Strong

Question: Which of the statements on this card comes closest to describing your views about the origin and development of man? (A) God created man pretty much in his present form at one time within the last 10,000 years. (B) Man has developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life. God had no part in this process. (C) Man has developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God guided this process, including man’s creation.



Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization, latest that of November 6-9, 1997.

Social and Ideological Profiles

Table 1 (pp. 42-43) tells us even more about the relationship of education and other social, political, and demographic predictors in the 1990s to Gallup’s typology of beliefs about human origins. As expected, those most likely to believe in the creationist worldview were older Americans, less educated, Southerners, political conservatives, biblical literalists, those for whom religion is “very important,” those with a pro-life stance on the abortion issue, and Protestants, particularly those in fundamentalist denominations such as Baptist. African-Americans and women were also significantly more likely to believe in the creationist account than were whites and men. In contrast, younger and better-educated Americans, main-line Protestants (e.g., Presbyterians), Catholics, those who were pro-choice on the abortion issue, and those who believed the Bible is the “inspired word of God” were more inclined to take the modernistic, “middle” position of theistic evolution. Support for the Darwinist worldview showed up primarily among college graduates, men, Easterners and Westerners, those who believe the Bible is a book of fables, legends, or history, and people who never attend church, as well as those with no religion, political liberals, pro-choice people, and political independents.

These social and ideological profiles characterize fairly well the supporters of what sociologists call the two worldviews involved in the creationist-evolutionist controversy: cultural fundamentalism, of which creationists (and perhaps most of the New Christian Right) are a subgroup, and cultural modernism, of which theistic evolutionists and Darwinists are subgroups.⁸

What, however, explains the persistence of these religious beliefs about human origins—creationist and theistic—and the apparent durability of the religious worldview

more generally in American society? Is it simply, as some psychologists might argue, that religion satisfies a universal human need for hope, comfort, and a sense of purpose in facing the inevitability of our mortality? Or are such beliefs not nearly as widespread, persistent, and universal as they often seem to be from the inside of American culture?

A Cross-National Perspective

Data from the religion module in the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) reveal huge cross-national differences in religious beliefs—and show just how religious Americans are compared to citizens of other developed countries.⁹ For example, we are among the *most likely* to believe that “The Bible is the actual word of God and it is to be taken literally, word for word.” We are three times as likely as the Norwegians

and nearly five times as likely as the British to express this view (see Figure 2).

We are also the *least likely* of any people surveyed in 17 developed nations to believe that “The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by man” (15%), a belief that is much more common in other nations such as Hungary (50%), Great Britain (47%), Israel (41%), Russia (58%), New Zealand (45%), and Norway (47%). Our beliefs about God, life after death, heaven, hell, the devil, and religious miracles—all part of the religious worldview—look equally unusual by comparison.¹⁰ So much for the universality of religion...

International Comparisons of Belief

Biblical literalism, like other religious beliefs, also turns out to be a fairly good predictor, cross-nationally, of be-

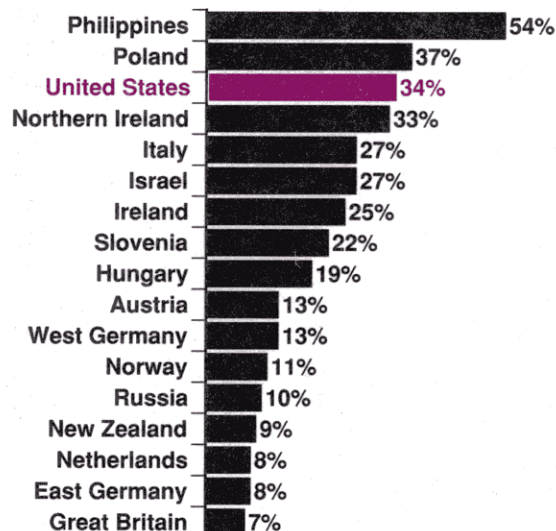
liefs concerning human evolution. What the public believes about human origins was measured by one item in a 12-item test of knowledge about science and the environment in the 1993 ISSP. Using a four-point scale (definitely true, probably true, probably not true, and definitely not true), respondents were asked: “In your opinion, how true is this... human beings developed from earlier species of animals?”

In their responses to this question, American adults were ranked as the least likely of any of the 21 nationalities surveyed to believe in evolution. As expected, when we correlate the rankings of the nations by affirmative responses to this item with the corresponding rankings for biblical literalism, we find a sizable inverse relationship in that the greater the biblical literalism of a nation, the lesser its belief in human evolution and vice versa.

Figure 2
US Ranks High on Biblical Literalism Measure

Question: Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible: (A) The Bible is the actual word of God and it is to be taken literally, word for word; (B) The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything should be taken literally, word for word; (C) The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by man...?

Those responding “Actual Word of God”



Source: Survey by the International Social Survey Program, 1991.

Table 1: Creationists Are Older, More Religious, and Conservative

	Creationist	Theist	Darwinist
By Gender			
Male	40%	45%	15%
Female	54	38	8
By Age			
18-29	43	44	13
30-44	43	46	11
45-59	50	38	11
60 and older	54	35	11
By Race			
African-American	59	37	4
White	46	42	12
By Region			
East	40	45	16
Midwest	47	43	9
South	54	40	7
West	45	40	16
By Education			
Less than high school	64	29	7
High school graduate	57	35	9
Some college	44	44	12
College graduate	31	53	17
By Religious Preference			
Protestant			
Southern Baptist	63	34	4
Other Baptist	67	31	2
Lutheran	47	45	8
Methodist	41	51	9
Presbyterian	39	48	13
Other Protestant	62	30	9
Catholic	42	50	8
Other religion	48	37	15
No religion	16	39	45
By Importance of Religion			
Very important	63	35	3
Fairly important	34	57	10
Not very important	13	40	47
By Beliefs About the Bible^a			
Actual word of God	77	21	3
Inspired word of God	39	54	7
Fables, legends, history	16	43	41

	Creationist	Theist	Darwinist
By Church Attendance^b			
More than once a week	77%	22%	1%
Once a week	58	39	3
2 or 3 times a month	47	44	9
Once a month	40	50	10
Less than once a month	34	46	20
Never	29	29	42
By Party Identification			
Republican	52	40	8
Democrat	50	39	11
Independent	38	46	16
By Political Ideology^c			
Conservative	58	34	8
Moderate	44	45	12
Liberal	35	42	23
By Abortion Issue^d			
Pro-Choice	32	50	18
Pro-Life	67	30	3

a Asked in 1991 and 1993.

b Asked in 1993.

c Asked in 1993 and 1997.

d Asked in 1997.

Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization, 1991, 1993, and 1997 combined.

Responses to the evolution item in the ISSP can thus be regarded as a rough indicator of the extent to which the scientific worldview has penetrated a given society and led to a decline in the religious worldview. Tom Smith, director of the General Social Survey, has also made the case that much of the difference in belief in human evolution between Americans and Europeans stems from the strength in recent years of the fundamentalist movement in our society, so that even the normally supportive effects of higher education on evolutionary knowledge are significantly diluted among those who identify themselves with fundamentalist religious denominations.¹¹ Differences in the religious environments in America and Europe, he argues, produce differences in beliefs about human evolution.

As one leader of the “scientific creationists,” Henry M. Morris, has characterized the struggle in America: “There

are only two possible worldviews—evolutionism or creationism.”¹² So the strength of the fundamentalist movement, and more generally that of the New Christian Right in the US, may help explain the apparent stability in beliefs about human origins observed in the Gallup data over the last 15 years or so, offsetting the rising percentage of college-educated adults in the American population.

A Spiral of Silence?

To explain the persistence of the religious worldview in America we also need to consider the possibility that much of its public expression is driven by what Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann argues is the individual’s fear of isolation, which sets in motion a “spiral of silence.”¹³ Americans are frequently reminded in the mass media and elsewhere that we are a “nation under God,” that nearly all of us (95% or so) believe in God—as Gallup

tells us periodically—and that we are one of the most religious societies in the modern world. So it should seem plausible that many Americans may be reluctant to express publicly agnostic or atheistic beliefs, such as Darwinism, for fear of offending someone who may be a member of that (purported) vast majority in our society, thereby incurring his or her disapproval. And this fear of interpersonal or social isolation may have the effect of maintaining the conformity of public beliefs so frequently expressed in survey interviews, just as in other social situations in life.

The percentage of Americans, for example, who say they have doubts about the existence of God or who hold alternative spiritual beliefs varies significantly with the wording of the question. A recent study I did of various wordings used by Gallup and the NORC-GSS shows that those who are most likely to hold agnostic, atheistic, or alternative

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spiritual beliefs—college graduates and post-graduates—and who are therefore most likely to experience the spiral-of-silence effect in our society, are more likely to be influenced than the less well-educated by whether the question permits such deviant beliefs to be expressed.¹⁴

Religious Beliefs Holding Steady

It will come as no surprise to learn that the religious worldview is still very much alive in America today. Like other indicators of religiosity in our society, the distribution of Americans' beliefs about human origins—creationist, theist, and Darwinist—has remained remarkably stable despite rising levels of education. Moreover, compared to adults in most other developed nations participating in the ISSP, we appear to be a highly religious, and some would say a highly superstitious, people who are either ignorant or disbelieving of the scientific explanation of human evolution from earlier species of animals.

“ Presently, the percentage of Americans who identify themselves with the biblical, creationist worldview is about 44%; nearly 4 out of 10 (39%) subscribe to the theistic evolutionist view; and only one in ten endorses the Darwinist position of natural science despite the rising percentage of college graduates, a trend which might be expected to have reduced significantly the proportion of adults believing in biblical creationism. ”

The persistence of this religious worldview in America may be due in large part, as some have argued, to the strength of the fundamentalist movement in our society in recent years which has succeeded in getting its message and agenda into the public schools, the mass media, and other institutions. But this movement may also represent, as Ronald Inglehart and others have argued, the throes of a religious minority whose traditional values and way of life are deeply threatened by the relentless secularization of our culture and the steady growth of the scientific worldview.¹⁵ There is also some evidence, albeit indirect, that the persistence of the religious worldview in America is due in some measure to a “spiral of silence” that surrounds the expression of agnosticism, atheism, and alternative spiritual beliefs.

In his book, *The Future of an Illusion*, and in one of his late lectures, “The Question of a Weltanschauung,” Sigmund Freud argued that the scientific worldview would inevitably replace the “religious stage” of wishful illusion and other pre-scientific modes of thinking in the evolution of human civilization.¹⁶ In

Freud's Austrian homeland, also in the land of Darwin and Huxley, and in much of the developed world, the religious worldview seems to have receded significantly, as Freud would have predicted, though not as yet in America where the scientific worldview has failed, as Stephen Jay Gould puts it, to “complete Darwin's Revolution...”¹⁷

Endnotes:

¹ George Gallup, Jr., “Religion in America,” *The Public Perspective* Vol. 4, No. 3, 1995, pp. 1-8; Richard Morin, “Keeping the Faith,” *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition* (January 12, 1998), p. 37.

² Frank Newport and Lydia Saad, “Religious Faith Widespread But Many Skip Church,” *The Gallup Poll*, March 29, 1997.

³ George Gallup, Jr., and Jim Castelli, *The People's Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1989); Andrew Greeley, *Religious Change in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); see also “Americans' Religiosity Strong and Unchanging: A Roper Center Data Review,” *The Public Perspective* Vol. 9, No. 2, 1998, p. 16.

⁴ Mary Nemeth with Nora Underwood and John Howse, “God is Alive,” Special Report: The Religion Poll, *Maclean's*, April 12, 1993, pp. 32-37.

⁵ James H. Leuba, *The Belief in God and Immortality* (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Co., 1921); Edward J. Larson and Larry Witham, “Scientists are Still Keeping the Faith,” *Nature* Vol. 386, April 3, 1997, pp. 435-436.

⁶ See Larry Witham, “Many Scientists See God's Hand in Evolution,” *The Washington Times*, April 11, 1997, p. A8.

⁷ The data and documentation for this poll are available from the Roper Center.

⁸ Raymond A. Eve and Francis B. Harrold, *The Creationist Movement in Modern America* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1991), Chs. 4 and 6.

⁹ See “The ISSP Cross-National Religion Survey: A Roper Center Data Review,” *The Public Perspective* Vol. 5, No. 3, 1994, pp. 21-25.

¹⁰ See the data from the religion module in the 1991 ISSP.

¹¹ Tom W. Smith, “Some Aspects of Measuring Education,” *Social Science Research* Vol. 24, 1995, pp. 215-242.

¹² Cited in Alice B. Kehoe, “Scientific Creationism: World View, not Science,” in Francis B. Harrold and Raymond A. Eve (eds.) *Cult Archaeology & Creationism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995).

¹³ Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

¹⁴ George Bishop, “What Americans Believe about Evolution and Religion: A Cross-National Perspective,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, May 1998, St. Louis.

¹⁵ Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, translated by W. D. Robson-Scott (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1927); and Sigmund Freud, “The Question of a Weltanschauung” in James Strachey (ed.) *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1965).

¹⁷ Stephen Jay Gould, “Can We Complete Darwin's Revolution” in Stephen Jay Gould's, *Dinosaur in a Haystack* (New York: Crown Publishing Co., 1995).



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