

Survey: Most Americans Don't See Disasters As God's Judgment

Most Americans believe in a personal God who is in control of everything that happens in the world, but a new national poll finds few believe that God sometimes punishes nations for the sins of some of its citizens or that earthquakes, floods and other natural disasters are a sign from God.

So says a new PRRI/RNS Religion News Survey was conducted by Public Religion Research Institute in partnership with Religion News Service following the recent earthquake and tsunami in Japan.

"Americans have more natural than supernatural views of disasters such as earthquakes, floods, or hurricanes," says Dr. Robert P. Jones, CEO of Public Religion Research Institute. "Americans overall resist drawing a straight line from theological beliefs about a personal God to God's direct role or judgment in particular natural disasters."

The new survey also finds that Americans are more likely to attribute the increased severity of natural disasters to global climate change than to signs of apocalyptic biblical prophecy.

"A solid majority of Americans say that the severity of recent natural disasters is evidence of global climate change, including most religious groups," says Daniel Cox, PRRI Research Director. "However white evangelical Protestants and Republicans are much more likely to believe that natural disasters are evidence of what the Bible calls the 'end times' rather than evidence of global climate change."

Among the findings:

- Seven-in-10 Americans see God as a person with whom one can have a relationship, and a majority (56 percent) say God is in control of everything that happens in the world.
- Less than four-in-10 (38 percent) believe earthquakes, floods and other natural disasters are a sign from God; even fewer (29 percent) believe that God sometimes punishes nations for the sins of some of its citizens.
- White evangelical Protestants are the exception to this pattern. Among evangelicals, about six-in-10 (59 percent) believe natural disasters are a sign from God, and a smaller majority (53 percent) believe that God judges nations for the sins of some of their citizens. Only one-in-five white mainline Protestants or Catholics believe God punishes nations for the sins of some.
- Nearly 6-in-10 (58 percent) Americans say that the severity of recent natural disasters is evidence of global climate change, compared to 44 percent who say that the severity of recent natural disasters is evidence of what the Bible calls the 'end times.'
- More than eight-in-10 also say that providing financial assistance to Japan is very important (42 percent) or somewhat important (41 percent) despite economic challenges at home. Support is high across political and religious groups.