Conventional wisdom, backed by some research, has suggested that the United States is becoming a more secularized nation - one where the significance of religion is declining. But results released Sept. 11 from the Baylor University Religion Survey paint a different picture.

In 2004, the General Social Survey reported that 14.3 percent of the population had no religion, but by using a more detailed measure in the Baylor survey, researchers determined that only 10.8 percent of the population or approximately 10 million Americans are unaffiliated.

"We believe, and are going to argue, that it [the statistics] has more to do with how you ask about the religious connection than what it says about the commitment of the average American to their faith," said Dr. Kevin Dougherty, assistant professor of sociology and one of the Baylor Survey researchers.

And ask is what the Baylor survey did. Funded by the John M. Templeton Foundation and conducted by Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion and the department of sociology, the Baylor Religion Survey is a project focused on improving understanding of American religion and is the most extensive and sensitive study of religion ever amassed.

The research group for the study includes Dr. Byron Johnson, professor of sociology and co-director of the ISR; Dr. Christopher Bader, assistant professor of sociology; Dougherty; Dr. Paul Froese, assistant professor of sociology; Dr. Carson Mencken, professor of sociology; Dr. Jerry Park, assistant professor of sociology; and Dr. Rodney Stark, University Professor of Social Sciences and co-director of ISR.

21st Century American Religion

In a national random sampling, the mailed questionnaire was completed by 1,721 respondents and covers varied facets of American religion and spirituality. Analysis of responses to the nearly 400 questions paints an initial portrait of American religious life in
the early 21st century. Specifically, the data examines such questions as:

- Just how religious is America?
- Do religious Americans favor any political party?
- How do religious Americans feel about the Iraq war?
- How does religious belief affect spending patterns in America?
- How do people's perceptions of God affect their view of government and their religious practices?

The survey was administered by the Gallup organization in the fall of 2005. Baylor ISR researchers began analyzing the data in spring 2006.

"We wanted to do something that most surveys don't and that is to probe questions that are typically not asked on surveys," Johnson said. "So for example, most surveys might ask how often you pray. We want to know whom do you pray to, what was the last thing you prayed about, and why do you pray."

"We know that a lot of Americans believe in God, but we want to know what you think God's personality is like and how engaged God is in the world."

Although analysis of the data will be ongoing, some significant findings have emerged from the preliminary analyses. The Baylor Religion Survey documents that:

- A third of Americans (33.6 percent), roughly 100 million people, are Evangelical Protestants by affiliation.
- The majority (62.9 percent) of Americans not affiliated with a religious tradition believe in God or some higher power.
- More than a quarter have read Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, but likelihood of reading the book decreases with church attendance.

The survey finds a surprising level of paranormal belief and experience in the U.S., with paranormal beliefs most prevalent in eastern states and less prevalent in southern states.

**Four Gods**

One area that emerged from the survey that has excited the researchers is what they call the "Four Gods." Depending on how engaged people think God is in the world and how angry God is with the world.

"If you think about people perceiving God as high in anger, low in anger, high in engagement, low in engagement, it results in four different types of gods," said Froese.

What researchers found was that the type of god people believe in can predict their political and moral attitudes more so than just looking at their religious tradition.

Researchers found that none of the "four gods" dominated among believers. The data showed:

- 31.4 percent believe in an **Authoritarian God**, who is very judgmental and engaged
- 25 percent believe in a **Benevolent God**, who is not judgmental but engaged
- 23 percent believe in a **Distant God**, who is completely removed
- 16 percent believe in a **Critical God**, who is judgmental but not engaged
Other demographic relationships and religious effects surrounding the "Four Gods" include:

- African-Americans believe overwhelmingly in an Authoritarian God (53.4 percent);
- Region of the country is significantly related to the four types of god. Easterners tend towards belief in a Critical God; Southerners tend towards an Authoritarian God; Midwesterners believe in a Benevolent God; and the West Coast believes in a Distant God.
- Individuals with lower educations and lower incomes tend towards more engaged images of God.

"This is a very powerful tool to understand core differences in the United States," Froese said. "If I know your image of God, I can tell all kinds of things about you. It's a central part of world view and it's linked to how you think about the world in general."

Paranormal Beliefs and Experiences

Some of the more intriguing findings came from the unusual questions asked by Baylor researchers, such as Americans' belief in:

- Atlantis and other advanced civilizations
- alternative medicine
- telekinesis
- psychics
- astrology
- talking to the dead
- haunted houses
- dreams
- UFOs
- Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster

"Nobody's ever asked these types of questions (about the paranormal) before, so we can't tell you if this is too many people seeing Bigfoot," Bader said. "One of the things the survey allows us to do over time is start to develop benchmarks."

Why should Baylor study religion in all its avenues? Baylor President John M. Lilley provided this answer:

"As a national research university, Baylor's aim is to undertake academic studies that not only examine basic questions but that also produce results that might sustain communities, might address all controversies and might contribute to social health and well-being," Lilley said. "Any study of our society without understanding of the role played by religion is necessarily incomplete.

"Why a Baylor research team? Because Baylor has the finest sociology of religion faculty of any university in the world, something of which we should be rightly proud. In addition, we are integrating our top scholars in business, economics, psychology, classics, philosophy, political science, and history and social work into this study. The researchers combined within the ISR will help us discover how a personal view of God directly impacts the role they choose to play in our society."

Knowing the goldmine they had on their hands, the group presented their findings to some major media outlets on the East Coast, including Newsweek, U.S. News & World Report, Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Washington Post and USA TODAY. They also presented their research at the annual convention of the Religion Newswriters Association; and to local and major Texas media at a briefing in Waco. An embargo against publication or broadcast of survey results was in place until 8:30 a.m. CDT Monday, Sept. 11, at which time the team held a news conference to release the findings.
to media at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.

This initial survey is only the first in a series of "waves." Additional surveys will take place every other year, with each "wave" containing religion questions but also will tackle new topical items. The next survey is slated for administration in fall 2007.

The current study was funded through a generous grant (ID# 11284) from the John Templeton Foundation, which was established in 1987 by renowned international investor, Sir John Templeton, to encourage a fresh appreciation of the critical importance -- for all peoples and cultures -- of the moral and spiritual dimensions of life. The Templeton Foundation seeks to act as a critical catalyst for progress, especially by supporting studies which demonstrate the benefits of an open, humble and progressive approach to learning in these areas.

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