

In age of Oprah, belief in miracles rises

by [David Briggs](#) in the [January 23, 2013](#) issue

These days, it may seem like a miracle that people still believe in miracles.

But even as more people appear to be turning away from organized religion, a new study finds that the number of Americans who believe in religious miracles increased 22 percent in the past two decades, with 55 percent now certain of this supernatural phenomenon.

Overall, some four in five Americans believe miracles definitely or probably occur, researcher Robert Martin of Pennsylvania State University reported at last year's American Sociological Association meeting in Denver.

While beliefs in heaven and hell have remained steady in recent decades, the increased belief in miracles crosses all religious traditions, with the strongest gains reported by those who attend services infrequently, Martin reported.

Why this new interest in religious miracles at a time when the number of Americans with no religious affiliation has been increasing? Think Oprah.

The increasing belief in miracles would seem to run counter to a culture undergoing rapid technological change, in which science is ascendant in individual lives. In addition, academic trends such as the growth of historical biblical criticism tend to cast added doubt on many biblical accounts.

In an article in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, "Three Centuries of Objections to Biblical Miracles," Mark J. Larson recounts some of these arguments by noted philosophers. Voltaire, Larson noted, said that a "miracle is the violation of mathematical, divine, immutable, eternal laws." David Hume called belief in miracles "a superstitious delusion."

"The intellectual winds of the last three centuries have blown in a direction contrary to belief in miracles," Larson concluded.

Yet the spiritual winds appear to be blowing in a different direction now. A 2010 Pew Research Center report found that 79 percent of Americans, including 78 percent of those 18 to 29, believe in miracles. In the 2003 National Study of Youth and Religion, 91 percent of respondents said they definitely or maybe believe in the possibility of divine miracles from God.

Penn State's Martin analyzed General Social Survey data from 1991 to 2008. He found that the belief in miracles has increased in recent years. Nearly 73 percent of American adults in 1991 believed that miracles definitely or probably existed, compared to 78 percent in 2008. The percentage who "definitely" believed in miracles rose from 45 percent in 1991 to 55 percent in 2008.

The strongest predictor of belief in miracles is found among people who frequently attend religious services. Demographic groups such as women and evangelical and black Protestants retain relatively strong beliefs in the existence of miracles.

But the greatest growth appears to be coming on the periphery of organized religion. One striking finding, for example, was that marginal attenders across faith lines strengthened their belief in miracles over the past two decades.

"Evangelical, mainline and black Protestants as well as Catholics, so long as they attended religious services once a year or more but less than once a month, all experienced a strengthening in their belief in miracles," Martin reported. Even among respondents with no religious affiliation, the percentages who believe in miracles increased from 32 percent in 1991 to 42 percent in 2008.

The trend is not being driven by any one generation but seems to be more of a larger cultural shift, according to Martin. What is contributing to this spiritual awakening about miracles among Americans not considered overtly "religious" by traditional standards?

One potential explanation, according to Martin, is the cultural preoccupation with miracles promoted in nondogmatic ways by a series of popular television programs such as *Touched by an Angel* and best-selling books such as the *Left Behind* and the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series.

No one, Martin and other researchers point out, may have done more for this spiritual phenomenon than Oprah Winfrey, who with her extraordinarily popular television show and other ventures made accounts of the miraculous a regular part

of the lives of millions of Americans.

Whatever the cause, the evidence on personal spirituality indicates to researchers the persistence of transcendent beliefs, such as that in miracles, even at a time when fewer Americans identify with a particular religious group.

“There’s still this profound interest in spiritual things,” Baylor University sociologist Kevin Dougherty said. “And beyond this being a cosmic force, it has relevance in individuals’ lives.” In the 2007 Baylor Religion Survey, 23 percent of respondents said they witnessed a miraculous physical healing and 16 percent said they received a miraculous healing.

In the 2010 Baylor Religion Survey, three-quarters of respondents said they prayed to God to receive healing from an illness or injury; more than five in six respondents prayed for someone else’s healing.

What is most telling about this unceasing belief in miracles, Dougherty said, is that it is another indicator that “as a society, as Americans in general, we are not in this uniform march toward secularism.”

That trend in itself, when compared to the dramatic declines in religious practice in much of Europe, may be considered by some a small miracle. —thearda.com

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