

Many Americans see God's hand in economy

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(RNS) The way you see God tells a lot about how you see the U.S. economy, according to a new national survey.

About one in five Americans combine a view of God as actively engaged in daily workings of the world with an economic conservative view that opposes government regulation and champions the free market as a matter of faith.

"They say the invisible hand of the free market is really God at work," said sociologist Paul Froese, co-author of the Baylor Religion Survey, released Tuesday (Sept. 20) by Baylor University in Waco, Texas. "They think the economy works because God wants it to work. It's a new religious economic idealism," with politicians "invoking God while chanting `less government.'"

Most (81 percent) political conservatives say there is one "ultimate truth in the world, and new economic information of cost-benefit analysis is not going to change their mind about how the economy should work," Froese said.

At the opposite pole, another one in five Americans don't see God stepping in to their daily lives and favor reducing wealth and inequality through taxation.

"So they're less likely to see God controlling the economy. Liberal economic perspectives are synonymous with the belief that there is no one `ultimate truth,'" Froese said.

This is a distinctly American cultural finding and specific to this point in history. It was different in the past, it might be different in the future and it's different now in Western Europe, Froese said. The survey of 1,714 U.S. adults, conducted by Gallup in fall 2010, was funded by Baylor, the National Science Foundation and the John Templeton Foundation. The margin of error is plus or minus 4 percentage points.

It finds nearly three in four Americans (73 percent) say "I know God has a plan for me." Within this group:

-- 49 percent say "the government in Washington is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and private businesses."

-- 79 percent say "able-bodied people who are out of work shouldn't receive unemployment checks if they are passing up jobs they can do."

-- 92 percent say "anything is possible for those who work hard."

But people who weren't working (one-third of those surveyed) answer differently, said another Baylor co-author, sociologist Kevin Dougherty. Working people, paid or volunteer, were more likely (45 percent) to say the government does too much than those who weren't working (37 percent). They were also more likely (81 percent to 72 percent) to say healthy people don't deserve unemployment benefits.

The idea of interwoven religious and economic views dates back decades to sociologist and economist Max Weber, said Chris Christopher, a principal economist with IHS Global Insight, an economic forecasting firm.

"Weber's classic work, 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,' explores this. I'm not saying everything Weber says is correct. But there's a correlation -- and a big debate over which causes which."