

New poll finds most Americans who believe in God see coronavirus as divine message

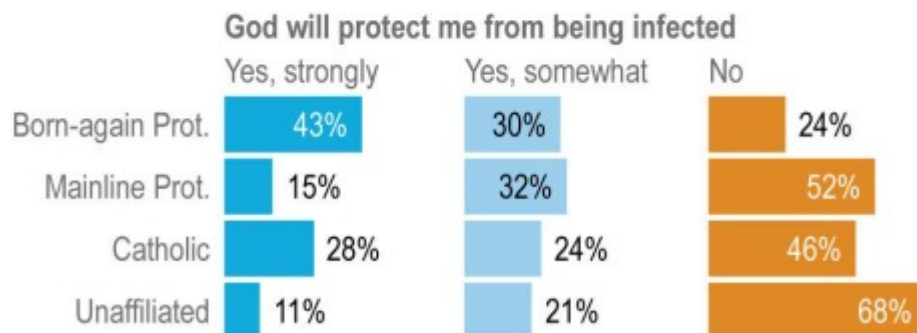
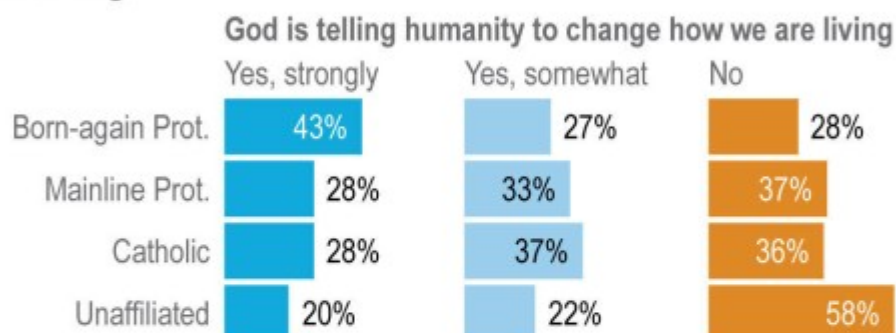
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Majority of Americans who believe in God think the pandemic is a divine message

A UChicago Divinity School/AP-NORC poll finds a majority of Americans who believe in God think God is sending a message that humanity needs to change, including many who feel that way strongly.

Thinking about the coronavirus outbreak, do you feel each of the following?



Other religious groups not shown because of insufficient sample size. Results based on interviews with 1,002 U.S. adults conducted April 30–May 4. The margin of error is ± 4.2 percentage points for the full sample.

Source: AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research



While the coronavirus rattles the United States, causing economic hardship for millions and killing more than 90,000 Americans, the findings of a poll by the University of Chicago Divinity School and the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research indicate that people may also be searching for deeper meaning in the devastating outbreak.

The poll found that 31 percent of Americans who believe in God feel strongly that the virus is a sign of God telling humanity to change, with the same number feeling that sentiment somewhat. Evangelical Protestants were more likely than others to say they believe this strongly, at 43 percent, compared with 28 percent of Catholics and mainline Protestants.

In addition, black Americans were more likely than those of other racial backgrounds—regardless of education, income, or gender—to say they feel the virus is a sign God wants humanity to change. Forty-seven percent say they feel this strongly, compared with 37 percent of Latino Americans and 27 percent of white Americans.

Kathryn Lofton, a professor of religious studies at Yale University, interprets the high number of Americans perceiving the virus as a message from God about change as an expression of “fear that if we don’t change, this misery will continue.”

“When people get asked about God, they often interpret it immediately as power,” said Lofton, who collaborated with researchers from the University of Chicago and other universities, along with the Associated Press, on the design of the new poll. “And they answer the question saying, ‘Here’s where the power is to change the thing I experience.’”

Fifty-five percent of American believers say they feel at least somewhat that God will protect them from being infected. Evangelical Protestants are more likely than those of other religious backgrounds to say they believe that, with 43 percent saying so strongly and another 30 percent saying so somewhat, while Catholics and mainline Protestants are more closely split on feeling that way or not.

However, the degree and nature of protection that God is believed to offer during the pandemic can differ depending on the believer. Marcia Howl, 73, a Methodist and the granddaughter of a minister, said she feels God’s protection but does not feel certain that it will save her from the virus.

“I believe he has protected me in the past, that he has a plan for us,” she said. “I don’t know what’s in his plan, but I believe his presence is here looking after me. Whether I can survive it or not, that’s a different story.”

Among black Americans who believe in God, 49 percent say they feel strongly that God will protect them from the virus, compared with 34 percent of Latino Americans and 20 percent of white Americans.

David Emmanuel Goatley, a professor at Duke University’s divinity school who was not involved with the survey, said religious black Americans’ view of godly protection could convey “confidence or hope that God is able to provide—that does not relinquish personal responsibility, but it says God is able.”

Goatley, who directs the Office of Black Church Studies at Duke, noted a potential distinction between how religious black Americans and religious white Americans might see their protective relationship with God.

Within black Christian theology is a sense of connection to the divine in which “God is personally engaged and God is present,” he said. That belief, he added, is “different from a number of white Christians, evangelical and not, who would have a theology that’s more a private relationship with God.” —Associated Press