

Most don't blame God for disasters

by [Nicole Neroulias](#) in the [April 19, 2011](#) issue

We may never know why bad things happen to good people, but most Americans—except evangelicals—reject the idea that natural disasters are divine punishment, a test of faith or some other sign from God, according to a new poll.

The poll, by Public Religion Research Institute in partnership with Religion News Service, was conducted a week after a March 11 earthquake triggered a devastating tsunami and nuclear crisis in Japan.

Nearly six in ten evangelicals (59 percent) believe that God can use natural disasters to send messages—nearly twice the number of Catholics (31 percent) or mainline Protestants (34 percent) who so believe. Evangelicals (53 percent) are also more than twice as likely as the one in five Catholics or mainline Protestants to believe that God punishes nations for the sins of some citizens.

The poll, released March 24, found that a majority (56 percent) of Americans believe that God is in control of the world, but the idea of God employing Mother Nature to dispense judgment (38 percent of all Americans) or God punishing entire nations for the sins of a few (29 percent) has less support.

From Noah's fabled flood to 21st-century disasters like Hurricane Katrina and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, some people blame incomprehensible calamities on human sinfulness.

Such interpretations often offend victims, however.

Public outcry prompted Tokyo's governor, Shintarō Ishihara, to apologize for calling Japan's recent disaster a "divine punishment" for Japanese

egoism.

"It's interesting that most Americans believe in a personal God and that God is in control of everything that happens in the world . . . but then resist drawing a straight line from those beliefs to God's direct role or judgment in natural disasters," noted Robert P. Jones, CEO of Public Religion Research Institute.

The poll found that most racial and ethnic minority Christians (61 percent) believe that natural disasters are God's way of testing our faith—an idea that resonates with African Americans' history of surviving slavery and racial discrimination.

In other findings:

- Most white evangelicals (84 percent) and minority Christians (76 percent) believe that God is in control of everything that happens in the world, compared to slimmer majorities of white mainline Protestants (55 percent) and Catholics (52 percent).
- Nearly half of Americans (44 percent) say the increased severity of recent natural disasters is evidence of biblical "end times," but a larger share (58 percent) believe it is evidence of climate change. White evangelicals are the only religious group more likely to see natural disasters as evidence of "end times" (67 percent) than climate change (52 percent).
- Across political and religious lines, roughly eight in ten Americans say government relief aid to Japan is very important (42 percent) or somewhat important (41 percent), despite our current economic problems.

"After one of these disasters, people turn to their clergy and their theologians and they look for answers, and there are no great answers," said journalist Gary Stern, author of *Can God Intervene? How Religion Explains Natural Disasters*. "But almost every group believes you have to help people who are suffering."

Prompted by the 2004 tsunami that devastated Southeast Asia, Stern interviewed

dozens of American ministers, priests, imams, rabbis, monks, professors and nonbelievers about their theories. They offered disparate views, sometimes at the same time: forces of nature are impersonal; God is all-knowing but not all-powerful; nature is destructive because of original sin or collective karma; victims are sinners; suffering helps test our faith and purify us.

Among evangelicals, there's a wide gulf between the fundamentalist perspective that sees disasters as proof of God's wrath and the moderate view that sees "a distinction between an earthquake as part of God's plan and God causing that earthquake," said R. Douglas Geivett, a religion professor at Biola University in La Mirada, California.

Natural disasters are tragic, "but if you ask [why God allows] earthquakes, you have to ask it anytime that people die. We would have to be prophets of God to know that," said Geivett, a former president of the Evangelical Philosophical Society.

The PRRI/RNS Religion News Survey was based on telephone interviews of 1,008 U.S. adults between March 17 and 20. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points. —RNS