

Heaven accessible to many, Americans say: A Baylor University study

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Heaven is no longer viewed as an exclusive place by many Americans, according to a new survey from Baylor University.

When researchers polled U.S. adults about who (and how many) will get into heaven, 54 percent of the respondents said at least half of average Americans will make it through the Pearly Gates.

More than a quarter of those surveyed—29 percent—said they had no opinion about the fate of the average American.

Rodney Stark, codirector of the university's Institute for Studies of Religion in Waco, Texas, said the findings represent a marked difference from those of earlier studies.

"I think that it's really just a . . . broadening because of the cultural experiences of diversity," said Stark, author of *What Americans Really Believe*, which details the study's findings on topics ranging from belief in guardian angels to the practices of "irreligious" people.

"I know that when we did studies like this back in the '60s, the notion that only Christians could go to heaven, for example, was much more extensive than it is now."

The finding that many aren't sure about other people's eternal destination is particularly meaningful, the scholars said. "It's kind of a good, American middle ground," said Stark. "Two generations ago, it would have been 'definitely not.'"

Researchers found that while 72 percent of respondents said at least half of Christians will make it into heaven, the figures were lower for other faiths: Jews (46 percent), Buddhists (37 percent) and Muslims (34 percent).

“I think what you’re seeing is a real level of religious tolerance,” said Stark. “It’s probably going to be higher ten years from now.”

The study, based on data collected last fall, also revealed that while 11 percent of the national sample said they have “no religion,” they may not correctly be termed “irreligious.”

Researchers found that 20 percent of those reporting “no religion” said they had attended church, 56 percent said they had prayed, and 32 percent said they prayed “several times a week or more.”

The survey’s findings, like some from the recent (and larger) Religious Landscape Survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, indicate a variegated religious picture of the United States that may challenge popular stereotypes and demonstrate that Americans are open to people of other faiths.

“It’s kind of a complicated landscape,” said Byron Johnson, codirector of Baylor’s Institute for Studies of Religion. “It’s much more complicated than I think people understand.”

Another example of the expanding image of U.S. religiosity is in findings about mystical and religious experiences. Researcher Christopher Bader, for example, was surprised to learn that 55 percent of respondents said they had been “protected from harm by a guardian angel.”

Though scholars don’t know if people were referring to a perceived sighting of an actual angel or to angelic protection in a potential car accident, they were struck by the range of people who acknowledged some experience of this kind.

“We found it among mainliners, evangelicals, black Protestants,” said Bader, director of the Baylor Surveys of Religion. “We found it among people who said they had no religion but called themselves spiritual. It’s one of those crossover experiences.”

The newest findings are based on a national sample of 1,648 adults. The study’s margin of error is plus or minus 4 percentage points. The data were collected by the Gallup Organization and the research was funded by the John Templeton Foundation in Pennsylvania. –*Religion News Service*