

Does God punish through natural disasters? Most Americans say, "No"

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—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 recent poll.

[Public Religion Research Institute](#), in partnership with Religion News Service, conducted the poll one week after a March 11 earthquake triggered a devastating tsunami and nuclear crisis in Japan.



When Hurricane Katrina swept through New Orleans in 2005, it triggered a flurry of questions about whether God sent the natural disaster as a message—or as divine retribution. The recent earthquake and tsunami in Japan spawned similar discussion. (RNS FILE PHOTO/Ted Jackson)

Nearly six in 10 evangelicals believe God can use natural disasters to send messages— nearly twice the number of Catholics (31 percent) or mainline Protestants (34 percent). Evangelicals (53 percent) also are more than twice as likely as the one in five Catholics or mainline Protestants to believe God punishes nations for the sins of some citizens.

The poll found a majority (56 percent) of Americans believe God is in control of the earth, but the idea of God employing 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 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 Gov. Shintaro Ishihara to apologize for calling the 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 most racial and ethnic minority Christians (61percent) believe natural disasters are God's way of testing faith—an idea that resonates with African-Americans' history of surviving slavery and racial discrimination.

Japan's population is predominantly Shinto or Buddhist—religions that view nature as a force beyond our control or understanding—but the poll could not get a representative sample of those groups in the United States.

In other findings:

- *Most white evangelicals (84 percent) and minority Christians (76 percent) believe 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. The only religious group more likely to see natural disasters as evidence of “end times” (67 percent) than climate change (52 percent) is white evangelicals.*
- *Across political and religious lines, roughly eight in 10 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 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.”

The question of God’s role in, and humans’ response to, disasters long has vexed the world’s major religious traditions, Stern said, even as answers often remain elusive.

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.

“The evangelical world is definitely focused on original sin and on the general sinfulness of our world ... and it won’t end until Christ returns,” Stern said. “In the mainline world, their theology is not well-suited to why God allows these things to happen, so their emphasis is on looking for God in the rescue efforts. And Catholics feel that suffering makes us holy, and there are mysteries that we can’t answer in this life, and we’ll find the answers in the next life.”

But 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 California.

“There are a lot of things that I wouldn’t cause to happen to my children to teach them certain lessons, but I might allow them to happen, so they might learn the lesson,” said Geivett, a former president of the Evangelical Philosophical Society.

“This is 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.”

The PRRI/RNS Religion News Poll 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.

