

# SCHWARTZREPORT

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Trends That Will Affect Your Future . . .

## AN AMERICAN PROFILE

| Stephan A. Schwartz |

*The Schwartzreport tracks emerging trends that will affect the world, particularly the United States. For EXPLORE it focuses on matters of health in the broadest sense of that term, including medical issues, changes in the biosphere, technology, and policy considerations, all of which will shape our culture and our lives.*

I thought I would start this column by focusing on two well-conducted recent surveys, one exploring belief in anomalous perception (AP<sub>1</sub>)—knowing something you could not know through normally mediated sense perception or from intellectual sources, the other dealing with anomalous perturbation (AP<sub>2</sub>)—consciousness in some way directly affecting physical reality. Each study confirms that beliefs associated with these two phenomenological cousins, whether belief is framed as psychic, spiritual, or formally religious—be it a traditional Christian, Hindu, deist, or secular metaphor—constitutes a powerful force shaping our world.

The first survey, which polled the general public, was conducted by the Gallup Organization.<sup>1</sup> It involved telephone interviews with 1,002 “national adults” (Americans 18 years of age or older). Gallup maintains the conclusions have 95% confidence with a maximum sampling error ± three percentage points. It found the following:

“About three in four Americans profess at least one paranormal belief,” and that, “the most prevalent belief is extrasensory perception (ESP), at 41%.” Twenty percent believe in reincarnation. Other phenomena that would involve what we are increasingly calling *nonlocal mind* include:

	Believe in (%)	
Extrasensory perception, or ESP	41	
Ghosts/that spirits of dead people can come back in certain places/situations	32	
Telepathy/communication between minds without using traditional senses	31	
Clairvoyance/the power of the mind to know the past and predict the future	26	
That people can communicate mentally with someone who has died	21	
Reincarnation, that is, the rebirth of the soul in a new body after death	20	

*(Data from the Gallup Organization.<sup>1</sup>)*

Gallup’s report also noted “that in addition to these items, the healing powers of the mind have been demonstrated empirically, (as is) reflected in the power of placebos, among other examples. More than half of Americans, 55%, believe in this connection.”

The poll further revealed that 42% of Americans believe that “people on this earth are sometimes possessed by the devil.” However, the Gallup Organization said, “It is unclear how many people treat that statement literally, and how many interpret it in metaphorical terms.”

No statistically significant difference emerged among people when they were considered by age, sex, education, race, and region of the country. Gallup says that Christians are somewhat more likely to hold “paranormal beliefs” compared with non-Christians (75% vs 66%, respectively).

This study was a follow-up to one conducted in 2001. Several items show modest declines since 2001 in the percentage

of people who profess such convictions, although the overall percentage of individuals with at least one paranormal belief has declined only slightly—from 76% in 2001 to 73% now.

Between the 2001 study and the present one, the biggest decline Gallup detected concerned belief in ESP: 41% in the present study as compared with 50% in 2001. Similarly, convictions about clairvoyance declined slightly: 26% now, 32% in 2001.

It has often been assumed—and several earlier studies have reported—that the greater a person’s educational level, the more likely he or she is to have a secular world view. However, in today’s religious environment, this is clearly changing, even among the highly educated. A second study involving 1,100 physicians was conducted by HCD Research and The Louis Finkelstein Institute for Religious and Social Studies of The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City.<sup>2</sup> It offers previously unplumbed insights into how health professionals view the form of anomalous perturbation generally known as “healing.”

The physicians in the survey come from a broad range of Christian and Jewish backgrounds, as well Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist religious traditions, and 72% of them indicated that “religion provides a reliable and necessary guide to life.”

According to Dr. Alan Mittleman, director of the Finkelstein Institute, “The picture that emerges is one where doctors, although presumably more highly educated than their average patient, are not necessarily more secular or radically different in religious outlook than the public.” Fifty-eight percent of these doctors attend worship services at least once a month, and 46% reported that “prayer is very important” to them.

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- 74% "believe that miracles have occurred in the past and 73% believe (they) can occur today."
- 55% "of physicians said they had seen treatment results in their patients that they consider miraculous (45% did not)."
- 9% "believe the Bible was written by God." [emphasis added]
- 37% of the physicians believe that the Bible's miracle stories are literally true, whereas 50% believe they are metaphorically true.
- 58% "believe the Bible was inspired by God."
- 12% "indicated that they did not believe in the Bible's description of miracles."
- 34% "consider it human ancient literature." (Data from HCD Research, Ltd and Finkelstein.<sup>2</sup>)

Because these physicians conceived of therapeutic intent in a formal religious context:

- 55% "believe that medical practice should be guided by religious teaching (44% do not)."
- 51% "pray for their patients as a group."
- 59% "pray for individual patients."
- 67% "encourage their patients to pray." Of those physicians: 5% "did so for God to answer their prayers," 32% "for psychological benefits," and 63% "for both reasons."
- 33% "did not encourage their patients to pray." (Data from HCD Research, Ltd and Finkelstein.<sup>2</sup>)

Several distinctions in these beliefs also emerged. The survey revealed an overwhelming bias orthodox Christians have for the supernatural, as compared with Reform Jews. The survey reported that, "Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox

Christian doctors tend to hold more supernatural views than Jewish doctors, with the exception of Orthodox Jewish physicians, who resemble their Christian peers."

Just how strong this bias is can be seen in the fact that 60% of the Protestant doctors believe miracle stories in the Bible are literally true. By comparison, although 53% of Orthodox Jews agree, among Conservative and Reform Jews, the percentage drops to 12% and 4%, respectively.

As the report states, "Such differences do not indicate that Christians are more religious than Jews. They do indicate that Christians tend to be religious in a more traditional way, whereas Jews are religious in a liberal way."

I was personally surprised at the number of physicians who attribute patient outcome to therapeutic intent, although they see it in the context of direct intervention by God.

- 35% of Catholics hold the belief that either all or a lot of the outcome of treatment is due to these nonmedical sources.
- 46% of Protestants agree. (Data from HCD Research, Ltd and Finkelstein.<sup>2</sup>)

There is a notable difference between this and the beliefs of Reform Jewish physicians: Only 20% of them attribute outcomes to nonmedical influences.

Several things about these studies bear consideration. In the "Paranormal" survey, it is unclear whether the Gallup Organization really understands the research that has been done in the areas of AP<sub>1</sub> and AP<sub>2</sub>. The design of the survey would seem to separate clairvoyance from ESP, a separation absent in the peer-reviewed literature. It also mixes astrology with ESP,

which few, if any, credible researchers would see as linked.

The Finkelstein study, similarly, seems oblivious to the entire corpus of therapeutic intent research and considers healing only in a formal religious context, in spite of numerous studies that show that the context of intention is important, but that one context—Christian healing versus Therapeutic Touch, as one example—is no better than any other.

What does come through in both studies, however, is that, even in the most orthodox communities, there is a growing understanding that ineffable considerations, most subsumed under the concept of nonlocal mind, hold considerable sway in the thinking of both the general population and the medical community.

#### REFERENCES

1. The Gallup Organization: Available at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/content/login.aspx?ci=16915>. Accessed July 26, 2005
2. The Louis Finkelstein Institute for Religious and Social Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary: Available at: <http://www.jtsa.edu/research/finkelstein/surveys/physicians.shtml>. Accessed July 26, 2005

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