

The Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology
“Genetically Modifying Food: Playing God or Doing God’s Work?”
Survey Highlights

The following highlights are drawn from a nationwide poll of 481 Protestant, 301 Catholic, 231 Jewish and 104 Muslim adults aged 18 and older conducted by Zogby International from July 16 to July 20, 2001. All telephone calls were made from Zogby International headquarters in Utica, N.Y.

The margin of error is +/- 5 percent for Protestants, +/- 5.7 percent for Catholics, +/- 7 percent for Jewish, and +/- 9 percent for the Muslims. Slight weights were added to race, region, party, age and gender among Protestants and Catholics to reflect the national population. Among Muslims and Jews, slight weights were added to region, party, age and gender. Note: Percentages have been rounded off to the nearest number and might not equal 100.

Summary

1) Scientists, through the use of biotechnology (also known as genetic modification), can move genes from one species or organism and put them into another. This includes not only moving genes from one animal to another, but also between plants and animals. Thinking about your own religious views or about ethics and morality in general, how do you feel about man’s use of this technology?

Table 1. Favor/Oppose Biotechnology

Percent	Protestant	Catholic	Jewish	Muslim
Favor	37	42	55	32
Oppose	57	52	35	46
Not sure	6	6	10	22

(* Favor combines strongly and somewhat favor; oppose combines strongly and somewhat oppose)

- In general, a majority of Protestants (including 62 percent of born-again Christians) and Catholics, and a plurality of Muslims, are opposed to moving genes from one species or organism and putting them into another. Jews are the only religious group in which a majority supports such biotechnology.
- Women in all religious groups, including women who work outside the home, are more likely than men to oppose biotechnology.
 - The difference is most pronounced among Jews, with 46 percent of women and 24 percent of men opposed. Catholic (61 percent) and Protestant women (60 percent) are identical in their opposition.
 - However, Muslims are closely split. Half (49 percent) of Muslim women and 44 percent of men are opposed.
- An average 57 percent of working women in all religions, except Jewish, oppose biotechnology. Half (51 percent) of Jewish working women say they favor biotechnology. Nearly one-third (31 percent) of Muslim working women say they are not sure.

- A majority of Jewish men (67 percent) and Catholic men (55 percent), as well as a plurality of Protestant men (43 percent), favor biotechnology. Just over one-third (35 percent) of Muslim men are also supporters.
- The sample of Hispanic and African-American Catholics, Protestants and Muslims is very small and it is difficult to draw conclusions. Nevertheless, half of Catholic Hispanics, 48 percent of Protestant African-Americans and 39 percent of Muslim African-Americans are opposed to agricultural biotechnology.

2). Which of the following statements comes closest to your own opinion – Statement A or Statement B?

Table 2. Role of Humans vs. God

	Protestant	Catholic	Jewish	Muslim
A: Humans have been empowered by God to use such knowledge to improve the life of humans everywhere	54	55	62	61
B: Humans are playing God and interfering in things that we don't understand	37	34	20	24
Neither/other	5	7	13	5
Not sure	4	4	5	10

- A majority in all religious groups believes that humans should use their knowledge to improve the life of other humans.
- Men are more likely than women in all religious groups to choose Statement A, with Jewish men (68 percent) most in agreement.
 - Three-fifths of Muslim women (62 percent), a majority of Jewish (57 percent) and Catholics (54 percent), and half of Protestant women (49 percent) also agree that humans should be improving the life of other humans.
- On the other hand, women are more likely than men overall to prefer Statement B.
 - Protestant women lead the way (40 percent), followed by Catholics (37 percent), and one-quarter of both Jewish and Muslim women.
 - Approximately one-third of Catholic and Protestant men agree with the second statement, compared to 23 percent of Muslim men and 14 percent of Jews.

3). Which of the following do you think best describes what the term “playing God” means to you?

Table 3. Definition of “Playing God” (ranked by highest percentage overall)

	Protestant	Catholic	Jewish	Muslim
Who controls the technology and who is exposed to its risks is an issue	26	26	32	19
Man is demonstrating a lack of humility towards nature	15	13	9	12
Man’s role as a good steward of nature has been violated	12	15	9	9
The sense of the natural purity of organisms has been violated	12	13	8	8
Science has become a “false priesthood”	12	12	7	18
Other	8	5	11	10
Not sure	15	16	24	25

- One-third of Jewish men and women agree that “playing God” refers to who controls technology and who is exposed to its risks. Also agreeing with this statement are an average 27 percent of Protestant and Catholic men and women overall, including 24 percent of born-again Christians, 15 percent of Muslim men and 24 percent of Muslim women.
- This belief is slightly stronger among working women, including 45 percent of Jewish women and 34 percent of Catholic women.
- There is general agreement on the other definitions, although “not sure” is a strong second response among Jewish and Muslim respondents.
- Most age groups, particularly those aged 30-49 and 50-64, generally choose the option “who controls technology” as their first choice when they define “playing God,” including 35 percent of Jewish adults in each of those two age groups. However, “not sure” rates a significant response among those 65 and older (37 percent among Catholics, and a 30 percent average among Jews and Protestants).
- From one-fifth to one-quarter of adults, aged 18-29, in three religious groups say that “playing God” means “a lack of humility towards nature.” It is lowest among young Jewish adults (13 percent).
- Young Protestants in this age group (26 percent) prefer the response “natural purity of organisms have been violated” as their first choice.

4). Looking at our place in the world, do you feel humans have an obligation to improve the world, or to preserve it and not change it?

Table 4. Humans' Place in the World

	Protestant	Catholic	Jewish	Muslim
Improve the world	38	41	60	49
Preserve it/not change it	18	24	10	21
Balance between the two	43	32	27	23
Not sure	1	3	3	7

- Improving the world or striking a balance between improving and preserving it are the top two choices in every religious group.
 - Jewish adults feel most strongly that humans have an obligation to improve the world, while Protestants are more likely than other religious groups to say that humans should strike a balance.
 - Nearly half of born-again Christians (48 percent) also believe humans should strike a balance.
- Men and women in all religious groups, except for Protestants, believe that the priority for humans is to improve the world.
 - Jewish men (69 percent) and women (52 percent) again rate it the highest, followed by Muslim men (53 percent) and women (43 percent), and Catholic men (42 percent) and women (41 percent).
 - Just over one-third of Protestant men (36 percent) and women (39 percent) say humans should improve the world.
- Jewish, Catholic and Muslim adults of all ages also agree on the need for humans to improve the world. One difference is among Muslims 50-64, with 43 percent of them saying we have an obligation to strike a balance, and Catholics 30-49, with 47 percent choosing to either improve the world or to seek a balance.
- Protestant men (48 percent) and women (38 percent) are more likely than their counterparts in other religious groups to say that striking a balance is important.
 - Protestants who are aged 18-29 (41 percent) and 30-49 (47 percent) also select this option first.
 - Those who are 50-64 (46 percent) and 65 and older (41 percent) feel it is better to improve the world.