



Sociologists Analyze America's "Four Gods"

That different people have different understandings of the nature of God is far from news, but two sociology professors at Baylor University believe they have found a newsworthy angle on this old story and have made it the basis of a book, *America's Four Gods*.



Acknowledging that there may be differences in theological viewpoints within a single culture is hardly a recent discovery. All Christians are familiar with an exchange recorded in St. Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus posed such a question to His twelve disciples, contrasting the world's view of His person with that upheld by His Church:

When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

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Not being a sociologist, Jesus did not merely take a poll of public opinion; He rendered a judgment of these various views. Thus St. Matthew records: "Jesus answered and said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.' "

Paul Froese and Christopher Bader, the authors of the study, pose a similar question, but one which has a markedly different intention from that posed in the Bible. As sociologists, they are not interested in the truth of any religious viewpoint, but the influence which such viewpoints have on a whole constellation of other values. Their study rests on 3,300 telephone surveys undertaken in 2006 and 2008, as well as 200 in-depth interviews. When Froese and Bader analyzed the data, they broke the views of Americans down into what they interpreted as belief in four fundamentally different conceptions of "God": Authoritative, Benevolent, Critical, Distant. [A USA Today article](#) on the Froese/Bader study offered a brief summary of these conceptions:

- The Authoritarian God (31.4% of Americans overall, 43.3% in the South) is angry at humanity's sins and engaged in every creature's life and world affairs. He is ready to throw the thunderbolt of judgment down on "the unfaithful or ungodly," Bader says.

Those who envision God this way "are religiously and politically conservative people, more often black Protestants and white evangelicals," Bader says....

- The Benevolent God (23% overall, 28.7% in the Midwest) still sets absolute standards for mankind in the Bible. More than half (54.8%) want the government to advocate Christian values.

But this group, which draws more from mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, sees primarily a forgiving God, more like the father who embraces his repentant prodigal son in the Bible, Froese says.



Written by [James Heiser](#) on October 11, 2010

They're inclined (68.1%) to say caring for the sick and needy ranks highest on the list of what it means to be a good person....

- The Critical God (16% overall, 21.3% in the East) has his judgmental eye on the world, but he's not going to intervene, either to punish or to comfort.

"This group is more paradoxical," Bader says. "They have very traditional beliefs, picturing God as the classic bearded old man on high. Yet they're less inclined to go to church or affiliate seriously with religious groups. They are less inclined to see God as active in the world. Their politics are definitely not liberal, but they're not quite conservative, either."

Those who picture a critical God are significantly less likely to draw absolute moral lines on hot-button issues such as abortion, gay marriage, or embryonic stem cell research.

For example, 57% overall say gay marriage is always wrong compared with 80.6% for those who see an authoritarian God, and 65.8% for those who see God as benevolent. For those who believe in a critical God, it was 54.7%.

- The Distant God (24.4% overall, 30.3% in the West) is "no bearded old man in the sky raining down his opinions on us," Bader says. Followers of this God see a cosmic force that launched the world, then left it spinning on its own.

This has strongest appeal for Catholics, mainline Protestants and Jews. It's also strong among "moral relativists," those least likely to say any moral choice is always wrong, and among those who don't attend church, Bader says.

Only 3.8% of this group say embryonic stem cell research is always wrong, compared with 38.5% of those who see an authoritarian God, 22.7% for those who see God as benevolent and 13.2% who see God as critical but disengaged.

Froese and Bader are writing as sociologists and not theologians, and thus their effort to classify a diverse public opinion into four broad categories is comprehensible, though one may ultimately question its usefulness in terms of predictability. Despite the effort to associate such general conceptions of "God" with various "hot button" political questions of the hour, no doubt many Americans who would identify themselves as "believers" have an understanding of "God" that incorporates several of the authors' categories — and more, besides. Regardless of whether they are Protestant or Catholic, evangelical or charismatic, Christians believe God to be both "just" (i.e., a Judge) and "loving" ("...God is love," 1 John 4:8), an understanding which shatters the exclusive categories sought by sociology. And certainly Christians and Muslims would have very different understandings of what "benevolent" means, theologically — speaking.

One interesting data point in the study: only [five percent](#) of Americans are atheists or agnostics. Whether one speaks of the religious views of 95 percent of Americans in terms of sweeping sociological criteria, or more specifically in terms of the theology of various denominations or religions, "none of the above" remains an unacceptable choice, regardless of the cultural and political divisions manifest in the Froese/Bader study. As [a sociological study](#) undertaken by Prof. Penny Edgell of the University of Minnesota determined in 2006:

From a telephone sampling of more than 2,000 households, university researchers found that Americans rate atheists below Muslims, recent immigrants, gays and lesbians and other minority groups in "sharing their vision of American society." Atheists are also the minority group most



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Americans are least willing to allow their children to marry.

Even though atheists are few in number, not formally organized and relatively hard to publicly identify, they are seen as a threat to the American way of life by a large portion of the American public.

The theological views of Americans may or may not be something comprehensible within the confines of sociology, but they certainly are unified in a concern about those individuals who do not believe in a source of authority higher than human opinion, and they may still be inclined, according to the old turn of phrase, to “count the spoons” after dining with someone who denies there is a God who judges the actions of men.



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