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How Americans view God

Americans have vastly different conceptions of the role that God plays in their lives, Baylor University sociologists Paul Froese and Christopher Bader write in their book “America’s Four Gods.” But there is a powerful force for civility at the core of nearly all Americans’ faith life: love.

by [David Briggs](#)



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Janet awoke in a hospital room after her second suicide attempt to the sense that “God was finally with me that night.” She entered a drug recovery program and became a nurse to care for others.

Jeremy’s moment of divine grace occurred during a long prison term, when in singing an old hymn he experienced God accepting his heartfelt remorse for his sins. It is God still, he believes, who is keeping him on the road toward redemption.

Many popular commentators try to box religious Americans into simple groups of polar opposites. But the stories of people like Janet and Jeremy and the great majority of other religious Americans just don’t fit.

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GO

Their experiences of God shape their lives in more powerful ways than terms such as liberal and conservative, or even Protestant and Jew, two prominent sociologists maintain in a new book.

In “America’s Four Gods: What We Say About God & What That Says About Us,” Baylor University scholars Paul Froese and Christopher Bader find that how people view God is one of the strongest predictors of a range of social and moral attitudes.

The good news, Froese and Bader report, is that for all the attention paid to the radical few who would burn Qurans or disrupt funerals with anti-gay hatred, there is a powerful force for civility at the core of nearly all Americans’ faith life: love, sweet love.

Taking data from the [Baylor Religion Survey](#), other national studies and interviews with people such as Janet and Jeremy, Froese and Bader point out that Americans almost universally view God as a loving parent. The desire to emulate God’s love moderates religious disagreements among the great majority of Americans.

“Love is maybe the commonality that can help perpetuate civil society,” Froese said.

America’s ideas of God

Ninety-five percent of Americans believe in God. But they have vastly different conceptions of the divine and the role God plays in their daily lives.

Froese and Bader divide these images into four basic concepts:

- **The Authoritative God:** God is like a literal [father](#), both engaged as a positive force in the world and a judge of the behaviors of humankind. Suffering can be the result of social and individual sins.
- **The Benevolent God:** God is mainly a force for good in the world, a being who answers the prayers of individuals and comforts the suffering.
- **The Critical God:** God is less likely to be concerned with moments in the lives of individuals, but will mete out judgments in the next life. This is a popular image among the poor and oppressed, the authors state.
- **The Distant God:** God is a cosmic force that sets the laws of nature in motion, but does not get involved in day-to-day events or movements.

Find out a person’s image of God, Froese and Bader said, and you can tell far more about that person than knowing the individual’s religious group or the house of worship he or she attends.

So a Catholic or an Episcopalian who believes in an authoritative God would be much more likely to oppose legal abortion and believe that the success of the United States is part of God’s plan than an evangelical who believes in a critical God.

At the same time, a Jewish person or United Methodist who believes in a benevolent God would be more likely to say government should have greater powers to combat terrorism or that creationism should be taught in schools than a Southern Baptist who believes in a distant God.

In separating people based on their [images of God](#), Froese and Bader found that significant numbers of people in all denominations could be found in each of the groups. Catholics and mainline Protestants were just about equally divided among the four categories.

“Our image of God is never simply a reflection of the beliefs of our religious community,” Froese and Bader write. “The traditional method of classifying people as Catholics or Baptists or Jews tells us little of consequence about what they believe.”

Surprising similarities

Forget about Glenn Beck and Richard Dawkins.

Froese and Bader bring an academic’s appreciation of complexity to debates often cast in black-and-white dichotomies, finding substantial areas of consensus among the real differences on moral and public policy issues.

“We hope this ends up being a way people can further understand each other,” said Bader, who is also associate director of the [Association of Religion Data Archives](#). “A lot of our labels don’t really work.”

For example, in evaluating attitudes on several hot-button issues, the authors found that those who believe in an authoritative or benevolent God, a divine being engaged with daily events, are far more likely than those who believe in a [distant](#) or [critical](#) God to say adultery, gay marriage, abortion, premarital sex and stem-cell research are almost always wrong.

But in placing the issues on a moral hierarchy, believers in all four types of God listed concerns in the same order, with adultery as the offense that is nearly always wrong, followed by gay marriage, abortion, premarital sex and stem cell research.

In the case of religion and science, believers in a God who is active in the world were more likely to say the nation relies too much on science and not enough on faith.

But the idea that transcendent ideals should guide scientific advances does not indicate a basic hostility toward science, the authors found. Only 11 percent of believers in an authoritative or benevolent God said science and religion are incompatible. And 63 percent agreed with the statement “Science helps to reveal God’s glory.”

And then there is that crazy little thing called love.

Eighty-five percent of Americans say that the term “[loving](#)” describes God well. This overwhelming appreciation of God’s love cannot be underestimated.

“A morality directly related to a loving God fosters respect for one another and charity and ensures that our differences will not spiral out of control,” Froese and Bader conclude. “A perfectly harmonious existence is clearly a dream, but at least it is a dream common to all of our Gods.”