

America's Four Gods¹

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Introduction

Religion unites us, but religion also divides us. Religion unites us by helping us see the relationship of all humans to the transcendent and by urging us to be charitable and compassionate to others. But at the same time, religion is the source of division, hatred, and violence throughout the world.

In today's partisan atmosphere, many say that American itself is divided by religion. Newt Gingrich, for example, has written that:

[T]here is no attack on American culture more destructive and more historically dishonest than the secular Left's relentless effort to drive God out of America's public square.²

In a similar, but opposite vein, Bill Maher has stated that:

We are a nation that is unenlightened because of religion. I do believe that. I think religion stops people from thinking. I think it justified crazies.

In the popular media, the United States is often portrayed as consisting of two distinct moral cultures, the first “composed of urban, latte-drinking, antiwar, gay-loving, God-hating abortionists, and the other ... of blue-collar, truck-driving, gun-toting, flag-waving, Bible-thumping rednecks.”³ If this is true, then it's not surprising that we have trouble finding common ground on political and social issues. But is this depiction really accurate?

The Baylor Religion Survey

We can start to answer this question by considering a recent national religion survey designed by two Baylor university sociologists, Paul Froese and Christopher Bader. The Baylor Religion Survey, which was administered in 2005 and 2007, had about 3400 respondents from across the United States. The analysis of the survey results were published in a fascinating new book entitled “America's Four Gods: what we say about God, and what that says about us.”

Froese and Bader had a clever insight: while it is hard for most people to articulate coherent positions on *abstract ideas*, like philosophical issues and moral principles, most people have little difficulty expressing their opinions about *God*. Indeed, a majority of Americans believe in God, and many of these people feel that they engage in daily conversations with God.

Now, those of you who don't believe in a personal God may find the idea of talking to God hard to imagine, except perhaps in the context of some long-ago dorm-room drug experience. But consider that each of us engages in *internal conversations*. When we are making important decisions or trying to understand unexpected events, our internal conversational partner may represent the point of view of *other people*. Social psychologist George Herbert Mead described this inner conversationalist as the “*Generalized Other*”⁴ that represents opinions typical of our community. For many religious believers,

1 © 2011 Karl Branting

2 As cited in P. Froese and C. Bader. 2010. *America's Four Gods*, Oxford University Press, at 3-4.

3 Ibid. 8-9.

4 Ibid. 9.

God plays the role of Generalized Other. Since conversations with the Generalized Other often involve the most important life issues, the God to whom a person speaks can be a window into the person's basic values and judgments.

Based on their analysis of the survey results, Froese and Bader make the surprising claim that most of the variation in Americans' religious beliefs can be reduced to the answers to just two questions:

1. Does God *interact* with the world?
2. Does God *judge* the world?

They claim that a person's answers to these two questions reveals the person's attitudes on a host of other religious and social issues.

My goal this morning is to explore what the varieties of Americans' beliefs about *God* tell us about our differences and similarities in *social, political, and moral* views. I'll also try to place this work into the larger context of the social psychology of religion.

Four Images of God

To start, let's assume that the only possible answers to the two questions above—does God interact with the world, and does God judge the world—are “yes” and “no.” Two possible answers to each of two different questions about God leads to four possible views of God. Let's consider them one by one.

First, consider the stance that answers both questions with “no,” that is, God has little or no interaction with the world and God does little or no judging of the world. If you recall your American history, you might be reminded of the *Deism* of the American Founders. For example, Benjamin Franklin said:

I imagine it a great Vanity in me to suppose, that the Supremely Perfect does in the least regard such an inconsiderable Nothing as Man. More especially, since it is impossible for me to have any positive clear idea of that which is infinite and incomprehensible, I cannot conceive otherwise than he the infinite Father expects or requires no Worship or Praise from us, but that he is even infinitely above it.

Franklin's God created the laws of nature and set the world in motion, but doesn't intervene in human affairs in any way. Froese and Bader refer to this conception as the *Distant God*. Distant God believers may “draw ... inspiration and strength from the idea that a greater power exists [that] is essentially a force for good in the universe” even if this power doesn't intervene in human affairs. Froese and Bader found that individuals who at first described themselves as “agnostic” often turned out to be believers in a Distant God who were uncomfortable with more traditional God images.

Let's move now to the opposite theological stance, which is to say “yes” to both questions, that is, God actively intervenes in human affairs, and God judges the world by rewarding good behavior and punishing bad behavior. Froese and Bader term this the *Authoritative God*. Believers in an Authoritative God may believe that God permitted the 9/11 terrorist attacks or Hurricane Katrina as punishment for the sins of Americans or residents of New Orleans, and they may believe that God rewards virtue with prosperity.

The two remaining possibilities are the *Benevolent God*, who is engaged in the world but *non-judgmental*, and the *Critical God*, who is judgmental but *disengaged*. Believers in the Benevolent God see God's handiwork everywhere but, unlike believers in the Authoritative God, they feel that God is a force *only for good* in the world and that God doesn't condemn or punish individuals. A typical

expression of this view is the following, by Squire Rushnell, creator of Schoolhouse Rock:

Imagine you gave me an assignment where I had to list all of the ways God has shown his benevolence to me and all of the ways he has shown anger. I would have to stop myself on the benevolent list when I reach 100. I would have a hard time coming up with a single item the “anger” list. I just cannot conceive of anger coming from God.⁵

For some, the Benevolent God is like an “all-powerful and ever-present life coach.” For others, the Benevolent God is more abstract, a pervasive force for growth. The Benevolent God would be familiar to traditional Universalists.

In contrast, the *Critical God* is disengaged from the world but applies divine justice in the afterlife. Poor and exploited people often believe in a Critical God, perhaps because the absence of blessings in this world lead them to take comfort in the thought of just desserts being dispensed in the next world.

In summary, the four Gods are:

1. Authoritative – engaged and judgmental
2. Benevolent – engaged and non-judgmental
3. Critical – disengaged and judgmental
4. Distant – disengaged and non-judgmental

So, we've divided all Americans into four groups based on their attitude towards God. Is there anyone we've missed? Well, what about atheists?

Froese and Bader have two responses to the question of how atheists fit in this scheme: first, the overwhelming majority of Americans describe themselves as believing in God, so atheists are only a small minority; and second, the attitudes of atheists are very similar to those of believers in the Distant God; so, atheism is just an extreme version of the Distant God.

Recent polls confirm that few Americans are atheists. In Froese and Bader's survey, about 5% of their subjects described themselves as atheists. Other surveys have found similar proportions: twelve percent described themselves as atheist or agnostic in a 2008 American Religious Identification Survey,⁶ and eight percent described themselves as atheists in a recent Gallup poll.⁷ This level of atheism contrasts sharply with other industrialized societies. The most atheist societies in the world may be Denmark and Sweden, where only about 10% of the population professes a belief in God.⁸ The figure is about 30% in France. Surprisingly, atheistic Danes and Swedes nevertheless regularly attend church, although they do so primarily for significant life events, such as marriages, funerals, and major holidays. Scientists are also much more likely than members of the general public to be atheists. A 1996 survey showed that only about 39% of professional scientists believe in God, and the proportion drops to about 7% for members of the elite National Academy of Science.⁹ But, Froese and Bader seem to be correct that atheists are a small minority in the United States, and their attitudes are very similar to those of Distant-God believers.

To recap, Froese and Bader claim that Americans can be neatly split into four groups based on their belief in whether God is engaged with the world or judgmental. Atheists are accommodated in this

5 Ibid 31.

6 http://b27.cc.trincoll.edu/weblogs/AmericanReligionSurvey-ARIS/reports/ARIS_Report_2008.pdf

7 <http://thenewamerican.com/culture/faith-and-morals/7808-gallup-more-than-90-percent-of-americans-believe-in-god>

8 P. Zuckerman. 2008. *Society without God: what the least religious nations can tell us about contentment*, NYU Press.

9 M. Shermer. 2000. *How We Believe*, W.H. Freeman and Company.

scheme by including them in the Distant God category or as a separate small category. Now we can turn to Froese and Bader's claim that knowing which God a person believes in predicts a variety of other social and moral attitudes.

Implications of Images of God

Political Affiliation

Let's start with *political affiliation*. Belief in God can't be the differentiator between liberals and conservatives because most liberals believe in God. However, *images* of God strongly predict *political affiliation*. Only one in ten (10% of) Authoritative God believers describe themselves as liberal, and more than two-thirds (68%) describe themselves as conservative. By contrast 45% of Distant God believers, and 63% of atheists, are liberal (and just 26% of Distant God believers and 16% of atheists are conservative). Benevolent and Critical God believers are in-between, with Benevolent closer to Authoritative and Critical closer to Distant. So, if we place God images in alphabetical order—Authoritative, Benevolent, Critical, and Distant—we get a smooth transition from mostly conservative to mostly liberal.

Religious Tradition

Let's turn next to identification with various *religious traditions*. Would you guess that the proportion of Evangelical Protestants who believe in an Authoritative God is high or low? If you guessed that the proportion is high, you're right: the actual proportion is over 50%. However, you might be surprised to learn that the proportion is even higher in Black Protestant churches: nearly 70%. Black Protestant churches are therefore an exception to the general rule that Authoritative God believers are conservative, because African-Americans overwhelmingly vote Democratic. This illustrates how, the relationship between religion and political alignment is actually much more complex than the stereotypes.

Turning to other religious traditions, Roman Catholics and Mainline Protestants are almost evenly divided among the four God concepts, with a plurality believing in the *Distant God*. So, knowing that someone is Catholic or Methodist actually says little about their image of God. For Jews, the proportion of Distant God believers is higher, almost 50%.

If we combine the findings about political orientation with the findings about religious traditions, we would predict that Roman Catholics and Mainline Protestants span the political gamut from liberal to conservative, but that Jews are more liberal than the other groups, which is indeed the case.

In fact, Froese and Bader found that every conception of God occurred to some extent in every religious tradition. For example, even the most conservative Evangelical churches contained people who viewed God as a life force rather than as an Authoritative character. (In fact, a 2008 Pew survey showed both that a significant proportion of self-described atheists *believe in God* and that a small but significant proportion of self-described Christians *don't believe in God*).

So far, we have discussed political orientation—where position on a dimension from Authoritative to Distant God image matches the position on a conservative-to-liberal axis—and God conceptions in various religious traditions, where we found that Evangelical and Black Protestant churches are unexpectedly similar, with a high proportion of Authoritative God believers, and that Roman Catholics and Mainline Protestants are also similar in having a heterogeneous mixture of God conceptions.

Religion & Science

Let's turn next to a hot-button culture-war issue, the relation between religion and science. We know that there is conservative resistance to the teaching of evolution in public schools and to stem-cell research. Do God conceptions predict attitudes towards these issues? The answer is once again "yes." In the Baylor Religion Survey, fewer than one in five (19%) Authoritative or Benevolent God believers agreed that humans evolved from primates, as compared to about two thirds (64%) of Distant or Critical God believers and 93% of atheists. These statistics are roughly reversed on the issue of whether creationism should be taught in schools (two-thirds [60%] Authoritative or Benevolent God believers, one third [31%] of Distant or Critical God believers, and only 6% of atheists). Similarly, believers in Authoritative or Benevolent Gods are much more likely to oppose stem-cell research than Distant or Critical God believers.¹⁰

These results suggest that one's conception of God should predict one's belief in the compatibility of science and religion. What group would you guess believes most strongly that science and religion are *incompatible*? As you ponder this question, consider the following two quotes:

The human mind evolved to believe in the gods. It did not evolve to believe in biology ... The uncomfortable truth is that the two beliefs are not factually compatible.

--E.O. Wilson, Harvard biology professor

I believe God did intend, in giving us intelligence, to give us the opportunity to investigate and appreciate the wonders of His creation. He is not threatened by our scientific adventures.

--Francis Collins, head of the Human Genome Project

As these two quotes suggest, the strongest belief in the incompatibility of science and religion is actually among *atheists*. Only 11% of the Authoritative or Benevolent God believers in the Baylor Religion Survey agreed that science and religion are incompatible, as compared to 18% of believers in a Critical or Distant god and 51% of atheists.

How is this possible? How can *opponents* of scientific views, such as Darwinian evolution, believe that science and religion are *compatible*? One clue comes from the opinions on the survey question "Science helps to reveal God's glory." Sixty-three percent of Authoritative and Benevolent God believers agreed with this statement, as compared to just 4% of atheists.

So it turns out that, aside from atheists, most Americans believe that God and science are entirely compatible. This undoubtedly accounts for the popularity of Intelligent Design, which purports to provide a scientific account consistent with an Authoritative God. Froese and Bader state that

The world's major religions have demonstrated an amazing ability to incorporate scientific thinking. While many believers are concerned that scientists sometimes overstep their boundaries and contradict religious tenets, believers overwhelmingly believe that science is an important source of truth and believe that science illuminates, rather than contradicts, their faith.¹¹

In short, nobody wants to come across as too narrow-minded to accept science.

¹⁰ Froese & Bader at 93.

¹¹ Ibid 104.

Relative Morality of Hot-Button Issues

Let's turn to attitudes towards hot-button *moral* issues. I'd like you to join me in a little exercise. I will name several behaviors, and for each one I'd like you to decide whether you think that it is always wrong, usually wrong, sometimes wrong, or not at all wrong:

- stem-cell research
- premarital sex
- abortion
- gay marriage
- adultery

Next, pick which activity is the worst. How many of you chose adultery?

Now, how do you guess Authoritative God believers rate these behaviors? As you probably guessed, Authoritative God believers typically find all these behaviors to be always or almost always wrong. However, they are not judged to be *equally* wrong. Rather, adultery is judged to be worse than gay marriage, which is worse than abortion, which is worse than premarital sex, which is worse than stem-cell research.

As we move from Authoritative to Benevolent to Critical to Distant God believers, this ordering—adultery is worse than gay marriage, which is worse than abortion, which is worse than premarital sex, which is worse than stem-cell research—remains constant, but the acceptability of each of these behaviors increases. When we reach atheists, premarital sex, gay marriage, abortion, and stem-cell research are all judged to be seldom if ever wrong. Among all groups, however, adultery is viewed as usually or always wrong. In other words, as God is viewed as increasingly less engaged and less judgmental, all these behaviors except adultery become more acceptable, but adultery remains unacceptable to every group. These results show, in the words of Froese and Bader, that:

[W]hen it comes to morality, we are actually more alike than we are different. Americans share a general moral culture [and] tend to agree on the *relative* importance of immoral behaviors.

Compatibility with the Evolutionary Theory of Religion

To recap, Froese and Bader claim that one's conception of God is a proxy for a wide range of social and moral attitudes, and that the answers to two questions—is God engaged and does God judge—distinguish among the main categories of God conceptions. Evidence from the Baylor Religion Survey indicates that, indeed, one's conception of God predicts political orientation and attitudes towards premarital sex, gay marriage, abortion, and stem-cell research. The survey also shows that conceptions of God vary with religious tradition: evangelicals are predominantly Authoritative God believers, Jews predominantly Distant God believers, and Catholics and mainline-Protestants fairly evenly divided among the four God-image categories. In sum, Froese and Bader's thesis seems to be confirmed by the evidence.

Froese and Bader leave unanswered, however, the question, “*Why* does one's conception of God predict social and moral attitudes?” Is this a new property of nature, like photosynthesis or Relativity? Or do America's four Gods somehow reflect some more general phenomenon? If so, what would it be?

One way to answer this question is to consider the *evolutionary theory of religion* currently popular

among social scientists. Under this theory, monotheistic religion is an adaptation to life in large groups in which God is a personification of social norms. For a believer, God promotes moral and altruistic behavior in much the same way that being watched by one's neighbors promotes such behavior; God is the ever-present embodiment of one's reputation within the group. Monotheism solves the problem of establishing trust among members of a society that is too large for everyone to know everyone else. Of course, not all religions are based on belief on the supernatural. But the evolutionary theory predicts that most religions require a display of sincere and permanent commitment to a group and its norms.

Does the Four-Gods model make sense in terms of the evolutionary theory of religion? Well, to say that God is the personification of social norms means that social values and rules are embodied in God's opinions and actions. So, imagine a society in which one's behavior is continually scrutinized by one's neighbors, and every action is praised or blamed based on strict community standards and traditions. The personification of such a society would seem to be an Authoritative God. Imagine instead a tolerant, cosmopolitan society in which one is free to choose among many options of personal behavior without worrying what the neighbors think. The personification of this society might be a Distant God. Big cities promote autonomy, while small towns encourage conformity, so it's easy to see why the Authoritative God is common in small-towns, where everyone knows everyone else's business, whereas the Distance God is common in large cities, with their anonymity and freedom. Similarly, the Critical God seems to personify a dysfunctional culture indifferent to suffering and injustice, whereas the Benevolent God seems to personify a more close-knit, supportive society, like a kibbutz or an extended family.

So, the evolutionary theory of religion and the Four-Gods model seem to be two sides of the same coin: the evolutionary theory says that monotheism promotes cooperation in large groups, and the Four-Gods model says the nature of the group controls the group's image of God.

The Four-Gods model also has connections to recent research *social networks*. You might be familiar with Stanley Migram's famous 1960s experiment showing that almost every pair of people on the planet has 6 degrees or fewer degrees of separation, that is, 6 successive steps are sufficient to connect any pair. You might also have read the about astonishing 2007 study showing that weight change is contagious, in that your friend's friends' friends' dieting habits have a measurable effect on your own weight. What you might not know is that there is now extensive research showing that social networks are a *major factor* in our behavior, attitudes, and emotions. For example, not only are you about 15% more likely to be happy if you have a happy friend, but the happiness of someone at two degrees of separation (i.e., a friend of a friend) makes your happiness about 10% more likely, and the happiness of a person at three degrees of separate (a friend of a friend of a friend) has a 6% effect.¹² The effect peters out a four degrees of separation, but summed across a total three-degree network, which can have thousands of members, the effect can be dramatic. Social networks, stretching to three degrees of separation, have been shown to influence not just happiness and weight, but income, smoking, loneliness, voting, suicide, and pregnancy. We typically marry someone who was 2 or 3 degrees of separation from us when we met them, that is, someone we didn't know but who was just over the horizon in our social network. We are affected not just by who is in our social network, but by *how they are connected* to each other.

I invite you to consider the *God-like* aspects of our social network. Our social network extends beyond us both physically and in time. It will continue in some form after we are gone, and existed in some form before arrived even though, like the cells of our body, it continuously changes. We can't grasp our

12 N. Christakis and J. Fowler. 2009. *Connected: the surprising power of our social networks and how they shape our lives*, Little, Brown and Company at 51.

social network—by definition, we don't know people who are two or three degrees of separation from us, much less how they are connected—yet our social network invisibly shapes our happiness, attitudes, emotions, and behavior. It is a *transcendent* entity that shapes our lives, not through the supernatural, but as an emergent property of the interconnected web of social connections that bind us. One could almost say that science has finally revealed God, not through NASA deep-space photographs, but by the ability of network science to show us that God is within ourselves.

And yet—lest we get carried away—our social network also very *un-God-like*. For one thing, one's social network is at least a little bit different from anyone else's. More importantly, your social network doesn't love you, even if it comprises some people who do love you. A social network just isn't the kind of entity that can have emotions or that you can have a relationship with. Instead, it is just shorthand for the part of our social world that measurably affects us.

I'd like to suggest, however, that one function of religion might be as a way forming a relationship with this unfathomable yet powerful force in our lives. An image of God may provide a way to grasp the tangle of connections constituting our social network. For some, these connections are intrusive and judgmental, for others benevolent and supportive, for still others, tenuous and indifferent. The religious stances identified by Froese and Bader may ultimately turn out to reflect the character of different social networks. But this is future work for the science of religion.

Conclusion

We started a few minutes ago with the question whether America consists of two distinct moral cultures, one religious and traditional, the other irreligious and progressive. The Baylor Religion Survey demonstrates that the reality is much more complex. Americans of all social and political persuasions are overwhelming religious, and a majority say that they believe in God or practice some form of spirituality. Thus, it is wrong to say that America is bisected into competing religious and non-religious factions. Instead, the division is primarily between different *forms* of religious commitment, as reflected in different conceptions of God. These divisions don't always correspond to the red-blue stereotype of the popular imagination. For example, Democratic-voting African-American Protestants and Republican-voting Evangelicals tend to have highly similar conceptions of God. Similarly, the proportion of Catholics who believe in a distant God is almost as high as the proportion of Jews, mainline-Protestants, and those who report no religion.

This division of Americans into four or five groups based on their conceptions of God is consistent with the perspective of evolutionary psychology, under which one's image of God is a personification of one's community or clan. In this view, one's relationship to God or to non-supernatural forms of the transcendent—such as nature, art, science, or the human family—is tied psychologically to one's relationship to one's community, and possibly depends on the properties of one's social network.

In conclusion, we *do* differ in our values, but these differences don't come from being more or less religious *per se*, but from the way our relationships to our communities or social network are reflected in our conceptions of the transcendent. As a liberal religious community, Unitarians are particularly likely to believe in a Benevolent or Distant God, or no God at all, but *every* religious tradition includes adherents of each of the four religious perspectives plus atheism.

The Baylor Religion Survey depicts a rich and complex religious landscape that bears little resemblance to culture-war stereotypes. The Survey shows us that while religion sometimes *divides* us, it also *unites* us in that we are more alike than different in our moral intuitions and in our need for meaningful connection to something greater than ourselves.