



America's Four Gods: What We Say about God - and What That Says about Us

Paul Froese , Christopher Bader

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Despite all the hype surrounding the "New Atheism," the United States remains one of the most religious nations on Earth. In fact, 95% of Americans believe in God--a level of agreement rarely seen in American life. The greatest divisions in America are not between atheists and believers, or even between people of different faiths. What divides us, this groundbreaking book shows, is how we conceive of God and the role He plays in our daily lives.

America's Four Gods draws on the most wide-ranging, comprehensive, and illuminating survey of American's religious beliefs ever conducted to offer a systematic exploration of how Americans view God. Paul Froese and Christopher Bader argue that many of America's most intractable social and political divisions emerge from religious convictions that are deeply held but rarely openly discussed. Drawing upon original survey data from thousands of Americans and a wealth of in-depth interviews from all parts of the country, Froese and Bader trace America's cultural and political diversity to its ultimate source--differing opinions about God. They show that regardless of our religious tradition (or lack thereof), Americans worship four distinct types of God: The Authoritative God--who is both engaged in the world and judgmental; The Benevolent God--who loves and helps us in spite of our failings; The Critical God--who catalogs our sins but does not punish them (at least not in this life); and The Distant God--who stands apart from the world He created. The authors show that these four conceptions of God form the basis of our worldviews and are among the most powerful predictors of how we feel about the most contentious issues in American life.

Accessible, insightful, and filled with the voices of ordinary Americans discussing their most personal religious beliefs, *America's Four Gods* provides an invaluable portrait of how we view God and therefore how we view virtually everything else.

America's Four Gods: What We Say about God - and What That Says about Us Details

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Darcia Helle says

America's Four Gods is a fascinating and unique look at how Americans perceive God. When the right questions are asked, we find that people claiming the same religion, and even worshipping within the same church, believe in different versions of the same God. These beliefs color much of each person's views on life, from personal morals to politics.

While this book is well researched, documented and detailed, it is also easy to read and entertaining. A great read for anyone interested in religion and/or human behavior.

Larry says

Despite the sociological talk (and what would you expect from sociologists), Froese and Bader have written a book that explains a lot about America as a product of the Baylor Religion Survey. In short, Americans believe in four gods: the Authoritative God (who is engaged with the world and judgmental); the Benevolent God (who loves us and helps us in spite of our failings); the Critical God (who keeps track of our sins without punishing us--yet); and the distant God (who stands apart from the world). To understand which God an American believes in is to be able to predict his/her stance on a whole range of issues, both theological and social. The hope that they present is that all four visions posit a God who loves us, which opens the way for dialogue. It's worth the hard slog through the social science language.

Matt Crawford says

This book tries to provide an explanation for the different versions of the same religion. It does this through surveys and anecdotes. The problem is that the anecdotes could be made up. The anecdotes leave you saying so? The book seeks to answer why we have so many different understandings about the nature of God. That's where the survey comes in. These people say this. They also claim to believe this. Walking away from this book is easy. Sticking till the end is difficult, even if there is not much space between covers

Steve Wiggins says

Sociologists, ever fond of graphs and charts, show us some very interesting things about human behavior. In this insightful little book, Froese and Bader provide ample evidence that Americans do not mean the same thing when they refer to "God." They posit four distinct thoughts about God's nature and personality. I say more about the book on my blog: Sects and Violence in the Ancient World.

Bob says

America's Four Gods: What We Say About God - & What That Says About Us provides an interesting, comprehensive, & disappointing survey of American religious beliefs especially as to how Americans view God. People's belief in God is assessed according to two criteria: To what extent is God believed to interact with the world, & to what extent is God believed to judge the world. These two criteria produce five very different descriptions of God: An authoritative God who is both engaged & judgmental; a benevolent God who is engaged but nonjudgmental; a critical God who is judgmental & disengaged; a distant God who is nonjudgmental & disengaged; & the Un-God -- the belief held by Atheists that no God exists, or that they have no concept of God. Many people select one of the five concepts of God as a result of their childhood experience with religion, as modified by later life experiences.

If the message of this book were to be summed up in one phrase, it would be that the primary characteristic of modern religion is incoherency, a condition in which one will create their own concept of what should be worshipped or rejected.

The author in one place states, "While Americans tend to be religiously devout, we paradoxically tend to know very little about religion, our own or others." Personally I would like to know how Christians, those who regularly attend church (at least 3 times a month) would have answered this survey.

The book gives great insight into what people think about God, this would be helpful for Christians seeking to share the Gospel with family, friends & co-workers. The book is a short, easy, & quick read.

Charlotte says

This book was the last selection for the season of our breakfast discussion group. The authors surveyed people across a wide spectrum of demographics with both a questionnaire about their perception of God and political and social beliefs. They categorized the belief in God in four broad areas.

1. Authoritarian God who is actively involved in our lives and also exerts wrathful judgement
2. Benevolent God who is actively involved, but forgiving and nurturing
3. Critical God who is not particularly involved-avoids direct interaction, but is displeased with evil and will harshly judge sinners at the final judgment
4. Distant God who set the universe in motion and then retreated to watch it unfold, and is not concerned with the judgment of mankind.

Note: A fifth category of those who considered themselves atheists was included

Several remarkable patterns were revealed by this study. One was that the belief in these four Gods was included in all of the religions and cultures they studied. For example they interviewed people in a small rural and isolated Baptist church with a pastor who was very much a "1" in the above categories and was certain that all of his congregation was there, but belief in the other 3 categories showed up in the surveys!

Most remarkable to our group, however, was that attitudes toward moral, social and political issues much more strongly paralleled how God was perceived than it did culture, economic position or even educational level!

The authors did an excellent job in sharing an objective presentation and explanation of the data, without

sharing any personal bias toward any one perception of God.

M Christopher says

An interesting premise and research but a bit overwritten. No huge surprises but a different way of understanding the "Culture Wars" and other points of disagreements among Americans over religion. It would be interesting to take the research deeper and compare to religious folk (particularly monotheists) in other countries. Some of the biases that crossed the authors' four categories seemed uniquely American to me.

Brian Chilton says

America's Four Gods present four ways Americans view God. One will find that none of the views of God are adequate. Perhaps no one except Christ has a complete view of God anyhow. However, one will find that how a person views God influences how the person views everything else in life. "America's Four Gods" is a must-read.

Joe Valenti says

In their book America's Four God's: What We Say About God & What That Says About Us, Paul Froese and Christopher Bader examine the different ways in which Americans view God and how said views determine their subsequent opinions on science, war, politics, economics, and morals. They claim that America is "not engaged in a battle between the secular and religious" (145) because, according to their data, ninety-five percent of Americans say that they believe in God.

I'm not sure I buy this conclusion, but the data is presented very well. I feel like the book could have been a presented in fewer pages, as there was a lot of repetitive content. However, it was helpful.

Ebony says

America's Four Gods is so seamless. It accounts for the beliefs of a majority of Americans.

The Authoritative God is engaged and judgmental

The Benevolent God is engaged but not judgmental

The Critical God is not engaged but judgmental

The Distant God is not engaged or judgmental

I read trying to find exceptions to their rules, but from the monotheistic perspective, they pretty much hold up across the board. I knew which Gods I wavered between and reading the first person accounts from other believers helped me to understand why. The authors are decidedly nonjudgmental in their reporting of people's beliefs. The charts were incredibly helpful. Their larger project argues that Americans are not as extreme right conservative religious and left liberal atheist as both sides want each other to believe. That middle of the road-ism allows most Americans to be religious, and turns down the volume on the culture wars. They argue that belief in God is a better indicator of values and moralism than other religious measures

like church attendance or sacred text engagement. How people talk about God might sound the same, but have the potential to reflect vastly divergent approaches to “moral absolutism, understandings of science, reactions to inequality, and responses to evil.” My strongest critique is that the book was better represented as its original Baylor Religious Survey results. There really was no need to drag it out as long as the book does.

Hansen Wendlandt says

We often assume there is some connection between religious belief and our social commitments. *America's Four Gods* makes a powerful and clear case about how those relate. What people think about God's interaction with and God's judgment of the world apparently can tell us quite a lot about what they think about politics, morality, science & money, certainly more than those sorts of demographic facts can tell us about how people believe about God. Froese & Bader explain their research clearly, without bias. Some results are expected, but categorizing our senses of God helps very much to understand how and why Americans disagree so much.

Ray Ruppert says

If this had not been an assigned reading for my theology class, I would not have finished it. Written by two sociologists based on their questionnaires of Americans, they came up with four basic views of God and then described how these views of God affected everything from politics to whatever. My problem is that while the views were not biblically accurate - or maybe a better way of saying it is that my view of God kept me from identifying with any of their four views. While interesting and perhaps eye-opening from a sociological standpoint, it would not have held my attention.

Robert says

A sociological investigation into the extent that various conceptions of God influence political and ethical thinking. It is based primarily on a statistical analysis of a survey questionnaire. This is of rather limited interest. More valuable is the field research interviews - the interrogation of people about their views on the nature of God. These are often quite interesting - especially those with the member of the infamous Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas. One can only guess how the choice of this particularly odd group to interview may have affected the study.

The study does provide statistical evidence that there is some correlation between one's conception of God and one's politics and ethics. A relationship is found primarily in those who view God as a stern, authoritarian judge, one who is highly active in the world punishing sin. These two factors, God's active presence in the world and the severity of his judgments, are the significant parameters - display the most correlation - are the most predictive - of political activity and ethical judgments - more so than, for example, denominational affiliation, or church attendance. The authors use these two factors to divide the study's population (a representative sampling of Americans - mostly Christians but with a tiny few of the Jewish faith or no faith at all) into four permutations, into four groups each with a different God conception: a stern, judgmental father active in the world punishing sin; a God of justice, distant from the world, displeased, but

biding his time; a loving God active in the world, working miracles and blessing his people; or an inactive, distant God, one "not that 'in' to us", more a spiritual force than a personality. The authors do an exhaustive statistical analysis of all four groups - but the only group showing a significant relationship between the conception of God and political and ethical thought, is the group that believes that God is actively punishing sin in the here and now. This is not exactly surprising, nor does it take much research to conclude that religion is likely to influence the political activity, the moral judgments, of this particular group. After all, these are the folks who believe that God sent a hurricane to show his displeasure with the New Orleans' Mardi Gras, that he crashed airplanes into the World Trade Center to signal his opposition to gay rights, who believe that he has no qualms about afflicting biblical devastation on entire nations, including the innocent, just to punish the sins. Seems quite natural, self-evident, that these folks would take an active, ardent role in politics, especially right wing politics - that they would try to purify the nation of gays, and abortion clinics, and secular humanists, if only to protect themselves from being caught up in the inevitable, fast approaching, divine wrath.

The value of the book lies in the interviews, not the statistical tables. They vividly demonstrate how much of right wing, Christian conservatism, is motivated by the fear of an angry, punishing God. This conception explains much of their fanatical ardor. They think of themselves as modern day Lots trying to clean up Sodom before God is forced to destroy it, and time is running out. This motivation of theirs is clarifying. It is fear not love that fuels their political activity. It is not only spiritual self-interest, but the self-interest to preserve their well-being here on earth that is so compelling - that so influences their moral judgments, their politics. For example, in their anti-abortion activism, their motivating concern is not only, or primarily, for the fetus in the womb but for their own safety, the safety of their families, their material well-being - and what might happen to them should God decide to punish abortion, and believing that his punishment is inevitable. To save themselves, they must save the unborn. Seems incredible that people could have such a conception of God, but I found this insight into their thinking explanatory of much of the current political scene.

The research for this book has been funded by the John Templeton Foundation, a richly endowed institution that supports such research in the conviction that it increases spiritual understanding and faith while remaining scientific and ecumenical. Some of what is supported is valuable - however, much seems grant-driven "busy work". This book seems to fall somewhere in between.

Bret James Stewart says

America's Four Gods seeks to provide a snapshot of how the American public perceives of God in regard to His characteristics and engagement with the country and wider world. This is accomplished with surveys and interviews with the end goal of determining how the perceived notions of God contribute to and interrelate with perceptions of moral and political world views.

The American public, of course, has as many views of God as there are people as the results are actually going to be on a continua with no two survey participants feeling exactly the same way about any given characteristic or quality of God. For ease of statistics, the authors decided to divide these beliefs into four separate categories, acknowledging the variations in opinion within any given category. These four categories include the Authoritative God who is judgmental and engaged with the world, the Benevolent God who is nonjudgmental but still engaged with the world, the Critical God who is judgmental but not engaged with the cosmos, and the Distant God who is both nonjudgmental and not engaged with the world.

I found this approach to be helpful in generalizing trends and how beliefs inform the way people expect the Lord to operate in the world and how the individual might support or argue for moral and/or political beliefs to which they adhere. As might be expected, the tendency of the categories is from more conservative to more liberal, and these tendencies display themselves in the associated statistics.

Negatively, I think the book is too simplistic to be of any lasting value, and I am not persuaded it is really worthwhile for the present. As is often the case with sociological texts at the introductory level, the information presented seems to be common sense, and, aside from specific terminology, I feel that I was already aware of everything the authors presented. Further, the authors are too liberal in their assessment for belief in God to skew the figures so that it appears that Christians represent a larger percentage of the population than is accurate. A related issue is their apparent belief in the two branches of Christianity, thereby tremendously skewing the statistics in an invalid manner. Moreover, the copy I read was an e-book, and the graphs that make up the spine of the text were all partially missing, so that I had to infer what the charts were. Overall, I do not recommend this book as it is too sophomoric and inaccurate for all but readers particularly interested in a sociological introduction to what they know before beginning the text. I sincerely think the book deserves 1.5 stars, but, since half stars are not allowed, I have rounded up to two.

Caroline says

Very interesting book regarding how Americans perceive God. The author has four categories: Authoritative, Benevolent, Critical and Distant. While God is complex, as well as one's overall beliefs, I think the authors do a good job of summarizing people's basic premise of God. The book helps one to think about their own beliefs and even helps one to understand why others perceive things differently. At the end is a questionnaire to assess your own beliefs.
