

# Americans hold four views of God, research shows

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WACO (ABP)—Americans believe in four different Gods—or at least view God in four distinct ways, a new study from Baylor University revealed.

Researchers from Baylor's sociology department and Institute for Studies of Religion conducted the survey. Called "American Piety in the 21st Century," it used survey data from 1,721 American citizens and was the largest such study ever conducted. Its 350 questions asked Americans their thoughts on a gamut of religion-related topics—from piety to politics to the paranormal.

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Among the survey's most publicized results was its finding that most non-atheist Americans believe in one of four main views of God's personality, which the researchers characterized as Authoritarian, Benevolent, Critical or Distant.

Which view of God one ascribes to, the survey found, can determine a lot about that individual's beliefs—more than other factors commonly studied, such as income, race, location and political affiliation.

[Christopher Bader](#), an assistant professor of sociology at Baylor and research fellow at the institute, said the research team made the report unique by rephrasing some of the routine questions usually asked on religion surveys. Such polls consistently report about nine in 10 Americans believe in God, but Bader and his colleagues thought views of God were complex enough to probe further.

The Baylor survey also asked whether respondents believed God is angry with sin, if he is involved in worldly affairs, if he is concerned with a person's well-being—and even if they believed he is a “he.”

Then, after asking dozens of probing questions, the team analyzed the responses and placed the results on a continuum. When they saw the answers fell naturally into four general areas on the spectrum, they grouped the responses into the four distinct views of God's character. According to the report, those perceptions of God significantly influence what people think about issues like gay marriage, divorce, premarital sex and the death penalty.

“What we find is this is terribly important because it can predict all kinds of things about an individual,” said [Paul Froese](#), a Baylor sociology professor and researcher. “It relates to their religious practices. It relates to their ideas about morality. It relates to their political opinions.”

One interesting result, Froese said, was the distribution of each of the four

God-types. While Catholics and mainline Protestants were rather evenly distributed across each view of God, African-American Protestants and evangelical Protestants tended more heavily toward the Authoritarian God—at 68 percent and 52 percent, respectively.

The Authoritarian God is characterized by a high level of involvement in daily life and world affairs. People who believe in the Authoritarian God believe he helps them in decision-making and punishes the unfaithful.

On the other hand, the Benevolent God is mainly a positive force in the world, still active in daily life but not condemning of individuals. Catholics were most likely to believe in this view of God, with nearly 30 percent adhering to the Benevolent view.

The Critical God, also a popular one among Black Protestants and mainline Protestants, stays mostly out of world affairs, providing critique of them from afar. People who believe in this God expect to receive judgment in the afterlife, Froese said.

Almost 42 percent of Jewish respondents and 36 percent of those unaffiliated with any specific religion believe in the Distant God. This God is not active in the world and not especially angry, either, according to the report. People who hold this belief tend to think of God as a cosmic force that set nature into motion.

The distribution is significant, Froese said, in that several seemingly random topics dramatically relate to an individual's perception of God.

Take geography, for instance. According to the report, the region with the most widespread belief in the Authoritarian God—44 percent—is the South. In the Midwest, 29 percent of people believe in a Benevolent God, which is the most of any region. In the East, 22 percent of people believed in a Critical God, and more than 30 percent of people in the West adhere to the Distant God view—more popular there than elsewhere.

Other significant relationships emerged, too. “The higher your income, the less likely you are to think God is angry,” Froese said. “The lower your income, the more likely you are to think God is angry. Gender is another big relationship. Women tend much toward the Benevolent God. Men are more likely to think God is angry.”

Thinking God is angry, however, does not necessarily lead people to a place of worship. According to the report, church attendance has less to do with perception of God and more to do with a relationship with him. Fire and brimstone sermons do little to get people in pews, Froese said.

“What we’re finding is that people are sitting in the pews because they feel personally engaged with God or that God is personally engaged in their lives,” he said. “It’s really the personal relationship with God that brings them around and gets them involved.”

The study also found Americans’ religious self-description often has more to do with their own view of what the ideal religious community is than the self-description of the congregation or denomination to which they actually are connected.

For instance, while nearly half of Americans identify themselves as “Bible-believing,” only 15 percent of the population identifies itself as “evangelical”—and only 2 percent of Americans say that’s the best description for them.

Perhaps most surprisingly, more people in mainline Protestant denominations identify themselves as “evangelical” than people who attend churches or are part of denominations historically viewed as part of evangelical Protestantism.

[Kevin Dougherty](#), a research fellow and sociology professor at Baylor, said the survey results suggest terms that researchers, journalists and political analysts often use interchangeably to describe evangelicals or other

religious groups are, in reality, not quite so interchangeable.

“When we asked about people’s religions identities ... the overwhelming response, almost half, of Americans say ‘Bible-believing’ captures me,” Dougherty said. “About a quarter say ‘[born-again](#).’ About a quarter say ‘mainline Christian.’ Far less salient were labels such as ‘fundamentalist’ and ‘charismatic.’”

That’s why estimates of the percentage of Americans who are evangelicals vary so widely, Dougherty said. It all depends on who is doing the labeling.

One thing is certain, though, he said. “Faith matters, and people know faith matters.” Baylor officials plan to continue conducting the survey every-other year, inserting new questions about current topics and trends each time.

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