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“If I Know Your Image of God, I Can Tell All Kinds of Things About You.”

Tuesday, September 12, 2006



“If I know your image of God, I can tell all kinds of things about you.” That profoundly accurate statement was made by Professor Paul Froese of [Baylor University](#), and he was speaking of “American Piety in the 21st Century,” a major new study released Monday.

The research team found that Americans are divided between four different images of God — identified as “Authoritarian,” “Benevolent,” “Critical,” and “Distant.”

As [USA Today](#) reported Monday:

Written and analyzed by sociologists from Baylor University’s Institute for Studies of Religion in Waco, Texas, and conducted by Gallup, the survey asked 77 questions with nearly 400 answer choices that burrowed deeply into beliefs, practices and religious ties and turned up some surprising findings:

Though 91.8% say they believe in God, a higher power or a cosmic force, they had four distinct views of God’s personality and engagement in human affairs. These Four Gods — dubbed by researchers Authoritarian, Benevolent, Critical or Distant — tell more about people’s social, moral and political views and personal piety than the familiar categories of Protestant/Catholic/Jew or even red state/blue state.

More:

Baylor researchers determined the Four Gods breakdown by analyzing questions about God’s personality and engagement.

The survey asked respondents to agree or disagree with any of 10 descriptions of their “personal understanding of what God is like,” including phrases such as “angered by my sins” or “removed from worldly affairs.” They could check off 16 adjectives they believe describe God, including words such as “absolute,” “wrathful,” “forgiving,” “friendly” or “distant.”

Look closely:

The four visions of God outlined in the Baylor research aren’t mutually exclusive. And they don’t include 5.2% of Americans who say they are atheists. (Although 91.8% said they believe in God, some didn’t answer or weren’t sure.)

Still, says Baylor’s Christopher Bader, “you learn more about people’s moral and political behavior if you know their image of God than almost any other measure. It turns out to be more powerful a predictor of social and political views than the usual markers of church attendance or belief in the Bible.”

This appears to be the major interest of this study — how are different visions of God connected to specific social and political behaviors. Given the fundamental importance of this question to any worldview, there is certainly some merit to

this approach (and great interest among politicians and sociologists).

Nevertheless, I must look at this survey as a Christian theologian. The political and social implications of this study are of relatively little interest to me. My interest is directed at the massive theological confusion apparent in these results.

Biblical Christianity cannot choose between a God of wrath and a God of love. The one true God is both loving and holy, and God's wrath is a function of his holiness. God's love for sinners who deserve nothing but His wrath culminates in the redemptive work of Christ on the cross— where He bore the Father's wrath for sinners.

In reality, the great confusion here is evident in the fact that millions of Americans would choose to believe in a "benevolent" deity who does not hate sin and would not dare punish sinners.

As Professor Froese remarked, "If I know your image of God, I can tell all kinds of things about you." For certain, that extends to correlated political, moral, and social beliefs. Far more importantly, a person's image of God reveals the condition of the soul — with eternal consequences.

COMING NEXT: A look at TIME magazine's cover story on prosperity theology.

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