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Introduction to America's Four Gods: What We Say about God and What That Says About Us

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INTRODUCTION

Why God?

In the representation of God, the believer has the whole of the world, even if he lacks all of its countless particulars.

—Georg Simmel

Picture yourself in a grocery store checkout line. You drop a few coins into a donation box for some local charity, and the cashier says, “God bless you.” What does he mean? Was it nothing more than a simple thank-you? Or maybe he was actually saying that an all-powerful and all-knowing supernatural being should reward you in this life or the next. Perhaps you are thrilled because you are a devout believer and are comforted by a kindred spirit. Or maybe you simply respond as if the phrase “God bless you” is devoid of any deep meaning. Perhaps you think the cashier is some sort of religious nut.

It is not clear what Americans mean when they talk about God. Yet references to God are everywhere. It is the rare presidential speech that doesn’t end with “God bless America.”¹ The phrase is all over bumper stickers and billboards. The Pledge of Allegiance informs us that we are “one nation under God,” and U.S. currency assures us that “in God we trust.”²

It’s been more than one hundred years since Friedrich Nietzsche declared that “God is dead.”³ And many great thinkers have argued that religion would slowly erode in the face of science and modern thought.⁴ But despite living in the most modernized and technologically advanced country, Americans report one of the world’s highest levels of belief in God. Americans’ faith in God appears constant even as we have come

to embrace twenty-first-century technology and the benefits of modern science. Yet the philosopher Charles Taylor offers an important caveat. “Belief in God,” he writes, “isn’t quite the same thing in 1500 and 2000.”⁵ The main difference is that belief in God used to be assumed. Now, it is consciously chosen.⁶

Yet few Americans opt out—only a small fraction of them are atheists. And large swaths of Americans still believe in the type of God Taylor associates with Western Europe circa 1500. For Taylor, this God was distinct for three reasons:

1. “because the great events of the natural order . . . were seen as acts of God”
2. because “a kingdom could only be conceived as grounded in something higher than mere human action in secular time”
3. because the world was filled with “spirits, demons, and moral forces”⁷

Although the historical context of these ideas has certainly shifted, a look at the beliefs of average Americans indicates that many agree that

1. God can alter the natural world
2. the United States is tied to God’s plan
3. spirits, demons, and moral forces exist

On these basic points, Americans aren’t much different from Western Europeans of five hundred years ago.

While references to God are certainly not dying, and many Americans report traditional beliefs about God, the significance of God to social and cultural life still may be diminished in the ways that Taylor asserts. Specifically, do different beliefs about God make people think differently, act differently, or live differently? If they don’t, then perhaps God is as good as dead, because God seems not to matter in our modern world.

Who Is God?

The word “God” is often heard in conversation both private and public, yet we tend to avoid deep discussions about God. Pragmatically, this allows us to sidestep potential arguments. We may be well advised to never discuss religion or politics in polite company.

The wisdom of this age-old advice was brought home to Jill, a middle-class professional who recently moved across the country for a new job. She casually joined a conversation about God with her new neighbors and was shocked to learn that they thought anyone who was not a Protestant would spend eternity in hell.⁸ Jill, a practicing Roman Catholic, asked us, “How do you overcome the fact that your friends think your whole life is a sin?” In Jill’s case, a pointed disagreement about God dissolved her blossoming friendship. Perhaps she would have been better off had she never learned about her neighbors’ God, and they could have continued their friendship in blissful ignorance.

While ignorance can indeed be blissful, there are important reasons for knowing what others think about God, even if it is sometimes uncomfortable or off-putting. The United States is a land of religious pluralism, populated by countless denominations and generously sprinkled with non-Christian minorities, not to mention nonbelievers. But Americans are losing sight of what it means to live in a diverse society. In their book *The Big Sort*, Bill Bishop and Robert Cushing show that we have segregated ourselves into enclaves of people who look like us, talk like us, and behave like us.⁹ The downside of this growing pattern of self-segregation is that we tend not to meet or interact with many people who appear different from ourselves.

Americans also suffer from growing religious illiteracy.¹⁰ While Americans tend to be religiously devout, we paradoxically tend to know very little about religion, our own or others’. Religion scholar Stephen Prothero has shown that America is composed of “Protestants who can’t name the four Gospels, Catholics who can’t name the seven sacraments, and Jews who can’t name the five books of Moses.”¹¹ Religious illiteracy increases the odds of misunderstanding and conflict.

Our confusion about religion is fueled by our own ignorance of each other, but it is made worse by the agendas of political and public figures. They would have us believe that we are in the midst of a struggle between “true believers” and the “godless” or, put another way, “fundamentalists” and “secular humanists.” Newt Gingrich, for example, has written that “there 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."¹² The idea that there is an army of atheists bent on undermining God in America is a popular one among conservative pundits. Conservative commentator Ann Coulter, as usual, minces no words: "Liberals can believe what they want to believe, but let us not flinch from identifying liberalism as the opposition party to God."¹³ But the simple fact that nearly 95 percent of Americans say they believe in God undermines any notion that we are engaged in a holy war over the existence of God.

We might, however, be in a war over who God is. When you consider the sheer number of religious traditions in America, you quickly realize that there is a deafening cacophony of descriptions of God—a stern white man with a long beard, a loving parent, a distant cosmic force, to name just a few. To give some semblance of order to this theological disarray, we set out to collect stories about God from Americans of all religious varieties and dispositions. We talked about God in cities and in towns, on the East Coast and the West, in towns with tourist attractions and in towns with farmland. Our travels led us to a creationism museum and to the halls of academic science departments. We also attended services at various churches and we visited religious communities, closely observing assorted rituals and recording distinct theological messages. Dozens of people from all over the country shared detailed testimonies of their relationships with God. Beyond the personal narratives of faith that fill the following pages, we also draw from a series of national surveys, which reveal distinct trends across the country.¹⁴

When talking to average Americans, we began by asking about the "look" of God. Clarice, a young nurse from the East Coast, felt that God must be white and male. "I'm not one of those that think God could be black or Chinese or female," she told us. For Clarice, God has clearly human characteristics, so much so that God has a distinct race and a gender. Some believers are shocked to hear others talk about the physical characteristics of God as if they were describing a neighbor or an acquaintance. These believers feel that God is in no way a physical being and sometimes even suggest that God is another name for the big bang—as did Mark, a day laborer from the Midwest, who felt that it was silly to talk about God's appearance.

Already, some clear divisions are evident in how Americans picture God. Overall, just under half (47 percent) of us believe that God is a "he."¹⁵ A third (33 percent) are undecided about God's gender, and a fifth (20 percent) believe that God is sexless. The sex of God is an obvious indicator of whether a person pictures God in human terms. In contrast to those who believe God is male, approximately half (53 percent) of Americans refer to God as a "cosmic force" and tend to dismiss the idea that God has any physical appearance.

While the "look" of God reveals some basic differences in theology, beliefs about how God behaves are even more crucial. Most Americans (81 percent) say that God performs miracles, and half believe that God "rewards the faithful in small ways." The extent to which we believe that God interacts with us and offers us blessings has a profound effect on what we think is right and wrong and what we feel we should be doing with our lives. The most dramatic stories about God came from Americans who felt that they were directly touched by God. In almost all cases, their divine encounters had powerful ramifications.¹⁶

One such encounter was described by Suzanne, a doting mother of a soldier fighting in Iraq whose faith in God helps her cope with anxiety about her son's fate. Suzanne explained,

I was waiting in the airport for my son who was returning from the Iraq War and there is a daddy there with a stroller and there was a little girl about six and a baby. Then here came Mommy, who was also away in Iraq. The six-year-old ran up to her and hugged her and the dad gave her a kiss and then she reached down and picked up the baby. And all of a sudden, I don't know what it was, but the baby looked up and her little eyes opened and suddenly—Joy! It's finding out whose child you are, is what belonging to God means. That is what I hope for every person. It's kind of like the prodigal son coming home. And you realize God's been watching, waiting for you the whole time . . . and the world's pains can be resolved in that kind of meeting.

Suzanne describes God as a watchful, caring, and protective parent—much like herself. God provides her with someone to lean on when so many others are leaning on her for strength and compassion. Suzanne said that she struggled with depression and apathy for most of her life

and more acutely once her son went off to war, yet in a miraculous encounter with God she felt unburdened of immediate anxieties and ongoing despair. Like the baby of her story, whose cries instantly subside in a happy reunion with her absent mother, Suzanne finally found joy in a God who became present in her life. For her, meeting God was a profound miracle.

Jack, a retiree living on the West Coast, told us another poignant story. He recalled:

When our first child was born, she was born nine weeks early. I was called by the hospital the next morning and they said, you get here, it doesn't look good. I went in and looked in the bassinet and she was having real difficulty breathing. I was in the room with my wife and we were waiting, really, for the baby to die. There was a Gideon Bible there and I just took it and opened it up to Romans. I looked down to "all things work together for good for those who love the Lord." That was an important passage for people in the hospital; it had been turned to lots of times. But . . . our baby died after twenty-six hours. But I really felt like God was present. That's probably the strongest sense of that I ever had.

Jack doesn't think God performs the kind of miracles that would have saved his daughter's life. For him, death and tragedy were an unavoidable part of life. Still, he drew enormous comfort from God's presence in this time of extreme distress and even feels a greater intimacy with God during horrible times.

Disagreements about the extent to which God rewards the faithful are followed logically by arguments about whether God punishes sinners. Jack in no way felt that the death of his daughter was a punishment from God. And only a fifth of Americans think that God punishes us in this life. But belief in a wrathful God is the key to some of our most basic perceptions of fairness and justice. Coral, a middle-aged Texan who struggles to make ends meet, relayed her concerns about divine retribution:

We're going to have to pay for what we've done and that is extremely scary to me because I know that even though I'm sitting here telling you I'm a Christian, I don't practice it 24/7. I don't always get a chance

to read my Bible. I don't always get a chance to pray like I should. Some Wednesdays and Sundays I just have to make myself get up and go to church because I really don't want to go. I'd just like to have a "jammie day" and stay home. But God is going to do the judging on who goes where, and that's real scary to me, very scary.

Americans like Coral, who fear God's wrath, brood over the meaning of the setbacks and tragedies that they encounter.

A displaced victim of Hurricane Katrina, Michelle, agonized greatly about why her family suffered their fate. She lamented:

This hurricane has touched me very close. You know all of my family is there. I just came from there last week and the things I saw . . . [*pausing to regain her composure*]. I don't want to believe that God caused all this pain and suffering. I can't believe that He's caused those things because that's not the God I like to think about.

Michelle was extremely distressed by some clergy who said that the hurricane was a warning from God. While she firmly believed in a God who is all-powerful, Michelle strained to reconcile her image of God with the suffering of her family.

Depending on a person's image of God, God's lack of action can be upsetting and confusing. Michelle pictured God as being in control and was consequently shaken by the fact that her life had spun out of control. Others—like Luis, a devoted father and grandfather struggling to hold his family together—take comfort in the idea that God understands his plan even when they do not. When asked how God has blessed his life, Luis, with much difficulty, said, "My son just went to Afghanistan for a year, my oldest son. He left his little baby and his wife at home and they are having a hard time. And I maybe can't even articulate what I want or what I hope for . . . but God knows, and I have great confidence that God knows." For Luis, God lies at the core of his hopes for the future and offers him ballast as his world spins into disorder.

Sociologists and anthropologists have long noted that humans try to make sense of the competing, often contradictory, aspects of the world by embracing or creating a "narrative" to explain them. As sociologist Christian Smith explains:

We, every bit as much as the most primitive or traditional of our ancestors, are animals who most fundamentally understand what reality is, who we are, and how we ought to live by locating ourselves with the larger narratives and metanarratives that we hear and tell, and that constitute what is for us real and significant.¹⁷

When Americans tell stories about how and why the world works as it does, God is usually a central character. Most have a “story of God” that can reveal aspects of themselves and their thinking that may not even be immediately evident to us. Indeed, Andrew Greeley, a Roman Catholic priest and respected sociologist, has proposed that religion is, for most of us, the primary narrative of our lives.¹⁸ “The central religious symbol is God. One’s ‘picture’ of God is, in fact, a metaphorical narrative of God’s relationship with the world and the self as part of that world.”¹⁹

For Greeley, God is the foundation of our worldview.²⁰ If so, then the kind of God we believe in is incredibly important.

Does God Matter?

In 1991, James Davison Hunter introduced us to the idea of “culture wars,” an evocative description of American social, political, and religious tensions that has entered our popular language.²¹ Hunter argued that Americans have fundamentally different understandings of reality. These different philosophical perspectives, in turn, determine our moral, political, and social values.²² For Hunter, the culture wars are rooted in radically different conceptions of moral authority. “Orthodox” Americans believe in a transcendent moral authority; “progressive” Americans believe that morality is more subjective.²³

Hunter’s culture war thesis met with some scholarly criticism but was embraced by the media as an elegant way to describe messy and confounding political and social divisions.²⁴ The popular notion of culture wars is premised on mutually held stereotypes—namely, that two distinct moral cultures exist, one composed of urban, latte-drinking, antiwar, gay-loving, God-hating abortionists, and the other made up of blue-collar, truck-driving, gun-toting, flag-waving, Bible-thumping rednecks. These stereotypes are referenced and reinforced by

the national media and political elites. But as with all stereotypes, reality is much more complex.

Still, Hunter is quite right that our conceptions of moral authority are most likely the key to understanding our social and cultural attitudes. But determining the extent to which an American is “progressive” or “orthodox” is a difficult project. How do we go about categorizing the moral philosophy of others when many of us cannot concisely express our own deepest moral and philosophical assumptions? This poses a problem for researchers trying to understand moral worldviews; in most cases, questions about transcendental authority, moral relativism, and root philosophical assumptions are met with blank stares.

Luckily, we can ask people about God. Most Americans believe in God and speak plainly about belief. And to them, God personifies moral authority. Consequently, when we talk to others about God, we gain access to their deepest moral and philosophical assumptions. Essentially, God is the supreme voice in our heads.²⁵

We constantly have conversations with ourselves. Should I go out tonight? Should I take this new job? The back-and-forth of our ideas, the pros and cons of our decisions are often played in our imaginations as a conversation. Social psychologist George Herbert Mead gave a name to the part of us with which we speak; for him, the “Generalized Other” is our internal conversation partner, through whom we imagine what others will think of us and our behaviors. It is easy to recall a time, most likely within the past few hours, when you have done exactly this. You get up and reach into your closet. Your hand casually lands on a shirt but then recoils. You imagine what a coworker, a spouse, a peer, or a neighbor will think or say about this article of clothing, and it is not good. What has occurred is a projected conversation between you and someone else—not an actual person but a Generalized Other.

Religious believers often speak about God in this way. What would God think? How would God respond to this? Which path does God want me to follow? Some of these conversations play out quite vividly, with believers saying that God spoke to them and told them what to do. For others, the conversation is subtler. They ponder their vision of God and imagine how God feels about their lives and their

decisions. Knowing a person's image of God, therefore, provides us with an opportunity to understand the most intimate moral and introspective conversations they have. Simply put, our picture of God is worth a thousand queries into the substance of our moral and philosophical beliefs.

The Two Big Questions

Attend a party or go to a matchmaking Web site, and you probably will ask and be asked dozens of questions aimed at revealing your true self. But what will your answers really reveal? While it is interesting to know that a person enjoys windsurfing, hates *Pretty Woman*, eats Chinese food every Friday, and hopes to one day write a mystery novel, this information ultimately fails to capture important aspects of who that person really is. Surprisingly, it is when a person talks about God, instead of herself, that she reveals the most.

In asking dozens of questions about God, we have uncovered two that pinpoint the most crucial theological disagreements in America. They are:

1. To what extent does God interact with the world?
2. To what extent does God judge the world?

If we know your answers to these broad questions, then we have tremendous insight into your entire worldview. In fact, our responses to these two questions predict the substance of our worldview much better than the color of our skin, the size of our bank account, the political party we belong to, or whether we wear a white Stetson or faded Birkenstocks. They say something essential about us because they reveal the kind of transcendent authority we look to when making decisions and planning our lives. With a knowledge of the diversity of Americans' conceptions of God, we can begin to dissect our culture wars in ways that exceed the artificial categories of Red states and Blue states, black and white, God-fearing and godless.

God is not dead because God continues to be the clearest and most concise reflection of how the average American perceives his world. As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz observed, "The notion that religion

tunes human actions to an envisaged cosmic order and projects images of cosmic order onto the plane of existence is hardly novel. But it is hardly investigated either, so that we have very little idea of how, in empirical terms, the particular miracle is accomplished."²⁶ By analyzing Americans' answers to our two big questions, we hope to explain how this miracle works.