

***America's Four Gods: What We Say About God and What That Says About Us***

Paul Froese and Christopher Bader. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

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The subtitle of this book could have been: when hermeneutics meets the sociology of religion. Paul Froese and Christopher Bader provide the reader who is interested in how Americans think about God an accessible and largely non-technical text which details the results of the Templeton funded Baylor and Religion Survey and Interview Project of 2005 and 2007. They articulate how the four-part classification scheme of God types: Authoritative, Benevolent, Critical and Distant is a superior mode of classifying the American religious landscape. The key turn in this argument is the idea that researchers can accurately infer one's morality from his or her image of God.

Froese and Bader utilize George Herbert Mead's view of religious influence positing that God "acts as a person's Generalized Other—the voice in our heads with which we have an ongoing conversation. (62)" What I found fascinating about this view is how the researchers argue that the ideas one has of God are not reducible to social indicators such as race, gender and income. By statistically controlling for these influences the authors argue one's God Image is the fundamental category for understanding religious types and how religion influences one's moral stances. However, I did not view the argument made by the authors to be compelling as they trace the source of the God image, with appropriate caveats and recognition of multiple influences, to one's childhood. The church one attends as a child is directly related to the socio-economic and cultural factors at work which Froese and Bader dismiss. To me, it is the influence of those factors while one is a child which sets up the trajectory of a God image.

One direction I thought of while reading the text, which Bader and Froese did not engage, is the economic incentives tied to the marketing and production of each God image. The sources of these four images were not really examined even though they did an excellent job of showing how variation occurs across the two basic theological questions of Providence and Theodicy. Bader and Froese provide the reader with this new typology as a way to interact with both the classification and measurement literatures in the sociology of religion and the American culture wars work which has gained significant traction over the past ten years. By complicating the over-simplified categories and classification schema utilized in the culture-wars theories, they provide a very helpful nuance and criticism. The culture wars, as

articulated in the works of George Lakoff and Thomas Frank, fail to recognize what Bader and Froese find to be enlightening—even in the same congregation people have different conceptions of God and these varieties influence how the individual view public moral issues.

Each chapter in the rather short main section of the book, one hundred and sixty pages with an extensive technical appendix, are efforts by Froese and Bader to display how the typology they offer aids us in understanding how religion and morality are related. The moral issues covered in the book are many—adultery, gay marriage, abortion, premarital sex, stem-cell research, poverty, war and evil. These moral questions are both private and public. It is the latter sphere where the authors connect their classification schema to the ongoing discussion in American political life about said moral concerns. They argue, somewhat convincingly, that one's view of God is a better indicator of one's morally informed politics than are class and classical religious measures, such as biblical literalism. These claims are nicely supported by both quantitative data displayed in easy to read tables and through narrative qualitative data. A strength of the book is in how the authors adroitly weave these two sources of data together.

The key logical turn, the one which their entire argument depends upon, is the idea that a God image is accessible to researchers in a way morals and values are not. These latent concepts can be reasonably inferred from one's God image. Other arguments existent in the sociology of religion literatures, be they rational-choice or structure-based explanations, are dismissed on the grounds that ideologies are the essential elements in understanding the interplay between religion and politics on both the individual and national levels. It will be interesting to see if the authors will have an opportunity to test their model in different countries. If so they will be able to understand much more clearly how the religious landscape in America differs from those of other countries. One vital insight gleaned by the researchers is that the four types all display the common element in the belief that God is loving. Why is this? I was left wondering at the conclusion of the text about the deeper analyses to be done and thoughts to be examined. This makes sense as the book is clearly directed toward a public audience as demonstrated by the lack of scholarly debates and in the depth at which they offer their analysis. *America's Four Gods* is an important offering to the Hertzog, Niebur and Bellah tradition of both offering an overview of the contemporary American religious mind and a new method of classifying that very broad and diverse religious society.