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Harvard Divinity Bulletin

DOES GOD MATTER? A Social-Science Critique by Paul Froese and Christopher Bader

American survey data show that even the most religiously devout individuals—as measured by religious practices and stated belief—seriously question their faith from time to time.¹ In times of doubt, individuals ponder the existence of the supernatural and the role that God does or does not play in their lives. Determining whether God matters or influences us is inevitably a deeply personal affair and ultimately relies on our own experiences and the stories and guidance we get from others.

As social scientists, we ask the question of whether God matters and influences us. But from a sociological perspective, this question is necessarily addressed in a much different way. We can look at whether those who believe in God act differently, have different opinions, and display different characteristics from those who do not believe in God. While this does not address the question of whether a supernatural being is actively engaged in the world—a topic outside the scope of sociology—it provides insight into whether religious belief and faith have a measurable impact on the world. If those who believe in God have no distinct political, social, or psychological characteristics, we can conclude that God does not matter to the extent that belief in Him is empirically irrelevant.

As it turns out, this type of analysis is largely fruitless simply due to the fact that nearly everyone, at least in the United States, purports to believe in God.² Still, it remains unclear what people mean by "God." In an analysis of United States public opinion data, George Bishop finds that Americans express no clear consensus on the nature of God.³ Clearly, an individual who views God as an abstract, cosmic force and an individual who views God as a bearded white man sitting in the clouds propose distinct religious worldviews. We would expect the impact of God on each of these individuals to be very different indeed.

Max Weber understood the importance of theological differences in determining how religion affects the world. Basically, he divided world religious traditions into four types: worldly aestheticism, otherworldly aestheticism, worldly mysticism, and otherworldly mysticism. Famously, Weber concluded that worldly aestheticism is the form of religion which most directly impacts society—the premier case being Calvinism. The microfoundations of his argument assert that religious belief systems inspire individuals to act in distinct ways. In the case of Protestantism, religious societies tended to produce more productive laborers and more active economies because there were (are) theological reasons, not just economic reasons, to work hard. In sum, Weber argued that religion matters greatly because it influences the behavior of individuals. But Weber also realized that religious traditions influence individuals differently because distinct religious doctrines offer divergent explanations about the world.

With modern survey data, we can more precisely capture the religious beliefs of individuals to see how they influence their attitudes and behavior. While Weber's typology of religions captures broad differences between world theological traditions, it is unable to identify religious differences between individuals within a religious tradition. Southern Baptists, Methodists, and Missouri Synod Lutherans are all Protestants, but there are real and powerful religious distinctions between and even within these denominations. To better account for variations within Protestant traditions and also

differences within other world religious traditions, we developed a measure of individual religious belief based on existing survey data.

Accurately delineating the content of religious beliefs is complex. Theological worldviews include intricate codes of morality, detailed descriptions of the supernatural, explanations about what is meaningful and important, and theories regarding social order. Contemporary studies of religion in the United States measure religious belief in a number of different ways—drawing on survey questions about the literalness of the Bible, conceptions of sin, importance of the Bible, and images of God.⁴ In the end, we feel that an individual's perception of God is the optimal indicator of the individual's religious worldview for a number of reasons.

First, God is the object of religious devotion. While certain non-theistic religious traditions posit no God, most religious believers refer to God in their practices and specifically ask God for blessings, forgiveness, and love. Even non-theistic religions can involve God (or gods); for instance, popular Buddhism is rich in supernatural beings, even though Buddhist intellectuals may eschew discussions about God.⁵ Second, beliefs about God are diverse. This provides a means to uncover religious diversity which remains hidden by broad typologies of religious traditions. Third, there are theoretical reasons to think that conceptions of God are important. Rodney Stark points out that "if the Gods truly are crazy, then religion is futile. But if the Gods are rational, then there is an immense range of possibilities."⁶ These possibilities include the likelihood that individuals respond to God based on how powerful, knowing, and judgmental they believe God to be. In essence, the power of God to influence human behavior lies in human belief about His power and His judiciousness. As Georg Simmel noted, "A deity that is subsumed into a unity with the whole of existence cannot possibly possess any power, because there would be no separate object to which He could apply such power."⁷ Therefore, we seek to quantify the power of God over individuals by measuring individuals' conceptions of God.

The task of measuring God's influence will likely cause discomfort, as Roger Finke and Amy Adamczyk note:

Following the lead of Durkheim, Weber, and Marx, social scientists have often felt more comfortable reducing the influence of religion to ritual or economics. Their underlying fear is that to accept the effects of beliefs as real is to accept them as true. But the "truth" of religious beliefs is not the issue. W. I. Thomas and a long line of social psychologists have reminded us that when something is defined as real, it is real in its consequences.⁸

In measuring different conceptions of God, we are not addressing a deity's reality or lack thereof. Rather, we simply recognize that God, or gods, are important to individuals in different ways. Clifford Geertz noted that "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."⁹ Part of the miracle begins with the individual's understanding of the supernatural, and we must begin to chart how this relates to that individual's general worldview.

As a perceived guiding force of human behavior, God's character has two key dimensions which we theorize should affect the attitudes and behavior of the individual. First, to what extent does God judge and punish humans? Second, to what extent does God watch and control daily actions? An active and vengeful God seems a daunting figure and one would be unwise to upset this deity. On the other hand, a distant or impersonal God forms a very different relationship with individuals.

The General Social Survey (GSS) provides a means to measure these aspects of God's character.¹⁰ A set of questions relating to individual conceptions of God allows us to construct a suitable measure of images of God. These questions tap the two fundamental characteristics of God: Is God a judgmental being? And is God personally interested in an individual's behavior? Four items ask respondents to locate their image of God between

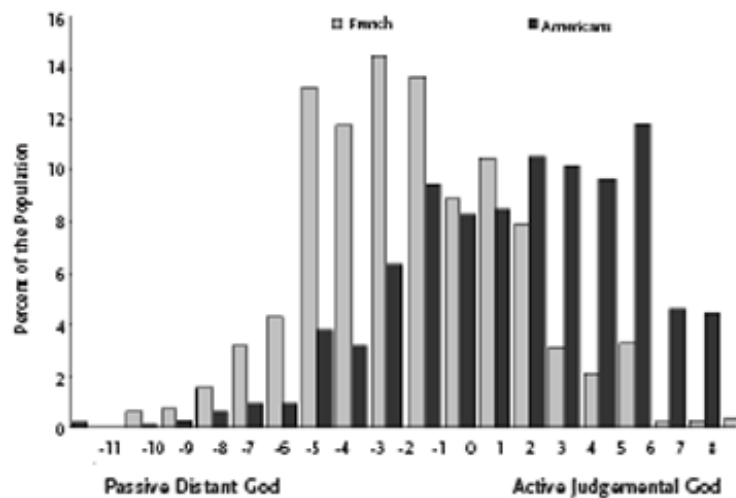
two distinct character descriptions on a scale of one to seven. Andrew Greeley conducted interviews to determine the response categories for these items and found that individuals tended to express their images of God in comparison to earthly relationships. For example, one question asked respondents whether God is more like a "mother" (1) or a "father" (7). Other contrasts presented to respondents included master/spouse, judge/lover, and friend/king. Greeley argues that a respondent generally indicates a choice between a God who is more of a partner or friend, versus a God who is more authoritarian in nature.

The remaining items in the image-of-God measure relate to God's role in the world. After all, God may be authoritative, but distant from human affairs. To determine the extent to which respondents believe God plays an active role in life, we included two additional items. One question asks respondents to indicate their level of agreement (on a Likert scale) with the statement "To me, life is meaningful only because God exists." This question indicates the extent to which an individual believes God is a part of her life. A further item asks respondents if there is a "God who concerns himself with every human being personally."

Responses from all six questions were summed to generate a single "God score."¹¹ Respondents with relatively low scores view God as a partner or friend and see him as relatively distant from earthly affairs. At the high end of the range are those respondents who consistently view God in more authoritarian terms (God is a king, father, judge, and master) and believe that God takes an active interest in the world and them personally. In the United States, the mean on the image-of-God measure was 2.00 with scores ranging from -13 (passive and distant God) to 7 (active and judgmental God).

For purposes of comparison, we also calculated image-of-God scores for French citizens.¹² France provides an interesting comparative case, because it is a highly modernized society which is generally, and correctly, viewed as less religious than the United States. In contrast to the mean God score of 2.00 in the United States, the mean God score for France was -1.26. In sum, Americans are more likely to view God as an active and judgmental being, while the French tend to view God as more of a passive and distant force. The major differences between Americans and French concerning their perceptions of God are most clearly illustrated by comparing the distributions of each country's scores (see graph below).

Comparing French and American images of God



The God scores for each country approximate normal curves but with little overlap. Visually, the distributions look like a two-humped camel. This result identifies a major divide between Americans and French in terms of how each group understands the power, role, and character of God in the modern world. At the most basic level, these

distributions illustrate a fundamental religious cultural difference between the United States and France; when Americans speak of God, they will tend to be much more literal about the activities and attributes of the deity. The ramifications of this difference return us to the initial question of whether God, or these different perceptions of God, matters.

In analyzing data from both countries with a series of regression models, we find that an individual's image of God appears to matter in a number of distinct ways.¹³ First, individuals with a more judgmental and active view of God are much more likely to attend church. While samples from both France and the United States contain mostly Christian respondents, this trend holds true for non-Christians attending their particular religious services. Second, individuals with a more passive and inactive view of God are more likely to express liberal attitudes concerning abortion, homosexual activities, and sexual activities outside of marriage. What makes these findings especially powerful is that one's image of God is statistically predictive of one's attitudes and behaviors even when controlling for a host of other important demographic information. In other words, individuals who are the same age and sex and have similar incomes, education levels, and religious affiliations will act differently and hold different moral attitudes based on their perceptions of God. In this way, God matters in both the United States and France.

In addition, God matters to politics. Images of God in the United States are highly predictive of political affiliations. In general, individuals with a more passive and inactive view of God will tend to be Democrats. Once again, this analysis controls for important demographic variables along with religious affiliation and church attendance. This means, for example, a Southern Baptist who believes in a more active and judgmental God is statistically more likely to be Republican than another Southern Baptist who views God in a more passive and inactive light, even when they share common demographic characteristics, including frequency of church attendance. In other words, an individual's belief about God tells us something more about her moral attitudes, behavior, and politics than we can find out through her church affiliation and religious behavior. In the end, image of God is a powerful variable. As social scientists, we interpret this to mean that God is a powerful influence on humans.

These findings offer a number of issues to ponder more deeply. First, we wonder why an active and judgmental God inspires more conservative attitudes. In theory, an active and judgmental God could dislike conservative attitudes. One can imagine, for instance, a religious doctrine which holds legal restraints on personal freedom as evil; under these circumstances, we would expect those with a more judgmental/active image of God to oppose the regulation of abortion and homosexual activities. While only a hypothetical example, it is true that Christian groups in the United States and France openly endorse a wide variety of moral perspectives, each based on individual interpretations of the Bible. Nevertheless, our data confirm that an active and judgmental God will inspire conservative attitudes regardless of one's religious denomination and regardless of whether one is French or American. Therefore, cultural and religious contexts, at least within the confines of our sample, do not appear to change the relationship between judgmental conceptions of God and conservative moral and political attitudes.

Perhaps there is a natural connection between active and judgmental conceptions of God and conservative views, at least with regard to morality. We would expect an active and judgmental God to be opinionated concerning human behavior—in essence, unforgiving of sins and rewarding of virtues. Similarly, conservative moral attitudes, as reported in survey data, tend to take the form of clear statements condemning certain forms of behavior. In contrast, liberal perspectives often seek to account for the circumstances and consequences of certain behaviors. Therefore, conservative moral attitudes fit with the idea that God is condemnatory with regard to particular human behavior.

The same could not be said of political opinions. There appears no clear philosophical connection between the Republican Party platform and believing in an active God. In fact, African Americans tend to believe in a very active and judgmental God while remaining Democrat. They represent a major exception to the discovered religious-political trend in the United States and indicate that there are important historical, cultural, and economic reasons why certain political groups are favored for religious reasons. It is clear that the Republican Party has effectively attached its message and

identity to a particular conception of God. But the fact that most conservative Protestants voted for Jimmy Carter over Ronald Reagan in 1980 shows how quickly religious and political mergers can dissolve.¹⁴

With growing resentment between Americans and French over current events, our data provide another interesting issue to ponder. To what extent do images of God create fundamentally different worldviews and endanger political dialogue? In other words, do the religious differences between Americans and the French uncover a division so deep within the worldviews of both populations that they may be irreconcilable? This question could also be posed for differences within the U.S. population. Perhaps this is a question of primacy. Do behaviors, moral attitudes, and political opinions necessarily follow from the individual's image of God? This is difficult to answer. Worldviews are complex bundles of many different ideas and opinions and get altered based on experiences, new information, and new social ties. Within systems of socialization it is impossible to grant primacy to any one aspect of a bundle of ideas and opinions which constitutes a worldview. Nevertheless, our research finds that certain bundles are more common than others.

In sum, we offer the following general rule: to the extent that individuals imagine God to be a judgmental and watchful deity, they will be more alert and obedient to what they believe God wants. In both the United States and France this proves to be true; images of God impact church attendance and influence one's moral attitudes concerning a host of behaviors. In addition, one's perception of God predicts one's political affiliation in the United States. God matters and lies at the heart of philosophical, ethical, and political differences in the world. Whether you view this as a good or bad thing probably also depends on your image of God.

Notes

1 Using data from the 1998 General Social Survey, we find that nearly half of those with a belief in God can still have their faith shaken by world events. Approximately 49 percent (49.4) of those who believe in God report that personal suffering has caused them to doubt their faith at least sometimes. About 47 percent (47.4) have had their faith shaken on occasion by evil in the world.

2 Current poll statistics indicate that around 95 percent of the American population believes in God. See George Bishop, "The Polls—Trends: Americans' Belief in God," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 63 (1999): 421–434.

3 Ibid.

4 Several contemporary studies on the effects of religious belief have indicated that religious concepts impact a wide variety of outcomes, from attitudes about gender roles, corporal punishment, and violence to how children view their parents and whether parents hug and praise their children or yell at them.

5 For a discussion of gods in Buddhism, see Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 90.

6 Rodney Stark, *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 20.

7 See Georg Simmel, "Religion and the Contradictions in Life," in *Essays on Religion*, trans. Horst Jürgen Helle (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 53.

8 Roger Finke and Amy Adamczyk, "Explaining Morality: The Influence of National Religious Context," p. 30. Presented at the 2003 meeting of the American Sociological Association.

9 See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 24.

10 Since 1972, the National Opinion Research Center has conducted a nationwide survey of a random sample of U.S. citizens on a near-yearly basis—the General Social Survey (GSS). In addition to gathering detailed demographic information on respondents, the GSS gathers opinions on a wide variety of topics, such as the role of government in public life, controversial issues such as abortion, confidence in public institutions, and a host of others. Of course, respondents are unlikely to spend five hours completing a survey so, in order to gather data on a broad range of issues, the GSS has adopted the practice of rotating groups of questions into and out of the survey in different years.

11 These six items were standardized (transformed into z-scores) and then summed to create the final image

of God measure (alpha = .62).

12 The International Social Survey Program enables us to replicate U.S. analyses of image of God in seven other countries. They are Australia, France, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, New Zealand, and the Slovak Republic.

13 The specific statistics and models will be presented in a series of more methodologically oriented articles written by Christopher Bader and Paul Froese to appear in a number of social scientific journals in the next few months.

14 Robert D. Woodberry et al., "Evangelicals and Politics: Surveying a Contemporary Mason-Dixon Line." Presented at the American Sociological Association, New York, 1996.

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***Paul Froese** is an assistant professor of sociology at Baylor University who specializes in comparative historical research with an emphasis in religion. He is at work on a book on religious persistence in the Soviet Union, and spoke on that topic at Harvard's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs in September. **Christopher Bader** is an assistant professor of sociology at Baylor University. His two specialties are the sociology of religion and criminology.*



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As it turns out, this type of analysis is largely fruitless simply due to the fact that nearly everyone, at least in the United States, purports to believe in God.² Still, it remains unclear what people mean by "God." In an analysis of United States public opinion data, George Bishop finds that Americans express no clear consensus on the nature of God.³ Clearly, an individual who views God as an abstract, cosmic force and an individual who views God as a bearded white man sitting in the clouds propose distinct religious worldviews. We would expect the impact of God on each of these individuals to be very different indeed.

Max Weber understood the importance of theological differences in determining how religion affects the world. Basically, he divided world religious traditions into four types: worldly aestheticism, otherworldly aestheticism, worldly mysticism, and otherworldly mysticism. Famously, Weber concluded that worldly aestheticism is the form of religion which most directly impacts society—the premier case being Calvinism. The microfoundations of his argument assert that religious belief systems inspire individuals to act in distinct ways. In the case of Protestantism, religious societies tended to produce more productive laborers and more active economies because there were (are) theological reasons, not just economic reasons, to work hard. In sum, Weber argued that religion matters greatly because it influences the behavior of individuals. But Weber also realized that religious traditions influence individuals differently because distinct religious doctrines offer divergent explanations about the world.

With modern survey data, we can more precisely capture the religious beliefs of individuals to see how they influence their attitudes and behavior. While Weber's typology of religions captures broad differences between world theological traditions, it is unable to identify religious differences between individuals within a religious tradition. Southern Baptists, Methodists, and Missouri Synod Lutherans are all Protestants, but there are real and powerful religious distinctions between and even within these denominations. To better account for variations within Protestant traditions and also

differences within other world religious traditions, we developed a measure of individual religious belief based on existing survey data.

Accurately delineating the content of religious beliefs is complex. Theological worldviews include intricate codes of morality, detailed descriptions of the supernatural, explanations about what is meaningful and important, and theories regarding social order. Contemporary studies of religion in the United States measure religious belief in a number of different ways—drawing on survey questions about the literalness of the Bible, conceptions of sin, importance of the Bible, and images of God.⁴ In the end, we feel that an individual's perception of God is the optimal indicator of the individual's religious worldview for a number of reasons.

First, God is the object of religious devotion. While certain non-theistic religious traditions posit no God, most religious believers refer to God in their practices and specifically ask God for blessings, forgiveness, and love. Even non-theistic religions can involve God (or gods); for instance, popular Buddhism is rich in supernatural beings, even though Buddhist intellectuals may eschew discussions about God.⁵ Second, beliefs about God are diverse. This provides a means to uncover religious diversity which remains hidden by broad typologies of religious traditions. Third, there are theoretical reasons to think that conceptions of God are important. Rodney Stark points out that "if the Gods truly are crazy, then religion is futile. But if the Gods are rational, then there is an immense range of possibilities."⁶ These possibilities include the likelihood that individuals respond to God based on how powerful, knowing, and judgmental they believe God to be. In essence, the power of God to influence human behavior lies in human belief about His power and His judiciousness. As Georg Simmel noted, "A deity that is subsumed into a unity with the whole of existence cannot possibly possess any power, because there would be no separate object to which He could apply such power."⁷ Therefore, we seek to quantify the power of God over individuals by measuring individuals' conceptions of God.

The task of measuring God's influence will likely cause discomfort, as Roger Finke and Amy Adamczyk note:

Following the lead of Durkheim, Weber, and Marx, social scientists have often felt more comfortable reducing the influence of religion to ritual or economics. Their underlying fear is that to accept the effects of beliefs as real is to accept them as true. But the "truth" of religious beliefs is not the issue. W. I. Thomas and a long line of social psychologists have reminded us that when something is defined as real, it is real in its consequences.⁸

In measuring different conceptions of God, we are not addressing a deity's reality or lack thereof. Rather, we simply recognize that God, or gods, are important to individuals in different ways. Clifford Geertz noted that "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."⁹ Part of the miracle begins with the individual's understanding of the supernatural, and we must begin to chart how this relates to that individual's general worldview.

As a perceived guiding force of human behavior, God's character has two key dimensions which we theorize should affect the attitudes and behavior of the individual. First, to what extent does God judge and punish humans? Second, to what extent does God watch and control daily actions? An active and vengeful God seems a daunting figure and one would be unwise to upset this deity. On the other hand, a distant or impersonal God forms a very different relationship with individuals.

The General Social Survey (GSS) provides a means to measure these aspects of God's character.¹⁰ A set of questions relating to individual conceptions of God allows us to construct a suitable measure of images of God. These questions tap the two fundamental characteristics of God: Is God a judgmental being? And is God personally interested in an individual's behavior? Four items ask respondents to locate their image of God between

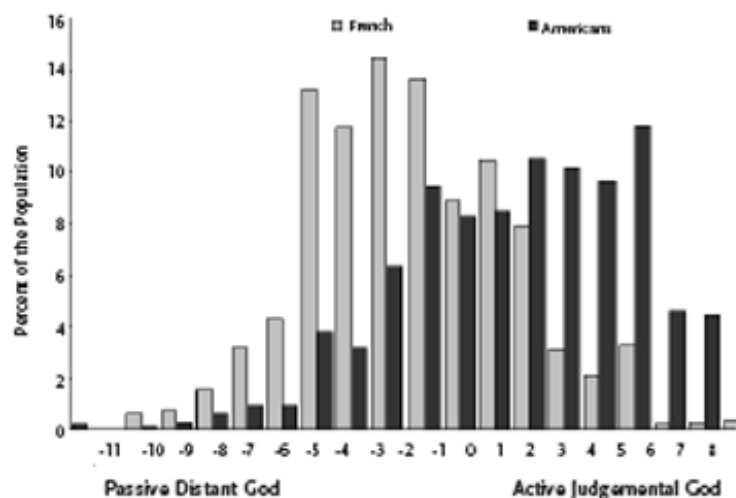
two distinct character descriptions on a scale of one to seven. Andrew Greeley conducted interviews to determine the response categories for these items and found that individuals tended to express their images of God in comparison to earthly relationships. For example, one question asked respondents whether God is more like a "mother" (1) or a "father" (7). Other contrasts presented to respondents included master/spouse, judge/lover, and friend/king. Greeley argues that a respondent generally indicates a choice between a God who is more of a partner or friend, versus a God who is more authoritarian in nature.

The remaining items in the image-of-God measure relate to God's role in the world. After all, God may be authoritative, but distant from human affairs. To determine the extent to which respondents believe God plays an active role in life, we included two additional items. One question asks respondents to indicate their level of agreement (on a Likert scale) with the statement "To me, life is meaningful only because God exists." This question indicates the extent to which an individual believes God is a part of her life. A further item asks respondents if there is a "God who concerns himself with every human being personally."

Responses from all six questions were summed to generate a single "God score."¹¹ Respondents with relatively low scores view God as a partner or friend and see him as relatively distant from earthly affairs. At the high end of the range are those respondents who consistently view God in more authoritarian terms (God is a king, father, judge, and master) and believe that God takes an active interest in the world and them personally. In the United States, the mean on the image-of-God measure was 2.00 with scores ranging from -13 (passive and distant God) to 7 (active and judgmental God).

For purposes of comparison, we also calculated image-of-God scores for French citizens.¹² France provides an interesting comparative case, because it is a highly modernized society which is generally, and correctly, viewed as less religious than the United States. In contrast to the mean God score of 2.00 in the United States, the mean God score for France was -1.26. In sum, Americans are more likely to view God as an active and judgmental being, while the French tend to view God as more of a passive and distant force. The major differences between Americans and French concerning their perceptions of God are most clearly illustrated by comparing the distributions of each country's scores (see graph below).

Comparing French and American images of God



The God scores for each country approximate normal curves but with little overlap. Visually, the distributions look like a two-humped camel. This result identifies a major divide between Americans and French in terms of how each group understands the power, role, and character of God in the modern world. At the most basic level, these

distributions illustrate a fundamental religious cultural difference between the United States and France; when Americans speak of God, they will tend to be much more literal about the activities and attributes of the deity. The ramifications of this difference return us to the initial question of whether God, or these different perceptions of God, matters.

In analyzing data from both countries with a series of regression models, we find that an individual's image of God appears to matter in a number of distinct ways.¹³ First, individuals with a more judgmental and active view of God are much more likely to attend church. While samples from both France and the United States contain mostly Christian respondents, this trend holds true for non-Christians attending their particular religious services. Second, individuals with a more passive and inactive view of God are more likely to express liberal attitudes concerning abortion, homosexual activities, and sexual activities outside of marriage. What makes these findings especially powerful is that one's image of God is statistically predictive of one's attitudes and behaviors even when controlling for a host of other important demographic information. In other words, individuals who are the same age and sex and have similar incomes, education levels, and religious affiliations will act differently and hold different moral attitudes based on their perceptions of God. In this way, God matters in both the United States and France.

In addition, God matters to politics. Images of God in the United States are highly predictive of political affiliations. In general, individuals with a more passive and inactive view of God will tend to be Democrats. Once again, this analysis controls for important demographic variables along with religious affiliation and church attendance. This means, for example, a Southern Baptist who believes in a more active and judgmental God is statistically more likely to be Republican than another Southern Baptist who views God in a more passive and inactive light, even when they share common demographic characteristics, including frequency of church attendance. In other words, an individual's belief about God tells us something more about her moral attitudes, behavior, and politics than we can find out through her church affiliation and religious behavior. In the end, image of God is a powerful variable. As social scientists, we interpret this to mean that God is a powerful influence on humans.

These findings offer a number of issues to ponder more deeply. First, we wonder why an active and judgmental God inspires more conservative attitudes. In theory, an active and judgmental God could dislike conservative attitudes. One can imagine, for instance, a religious doctrine which holds legal restraints on personal freedom as evil; under these circumstances, we would expect those with a more judgmental/active image of God to oppose the regulation of abortion and homosexual activities. While only a hypothetical example, it is true that Christian groups in the United States and France openly endorse a wide variety of moral perspectives, each based on individual interpretations of the Bible. Nevertheless, our data confirm that an active and judgmental God will inspire conservative attitudes regardless of one's religious denomination and regardless of whether one is French or American. Therefore, cultural and religious contexts, at least within the confines of our sample, do not appear to change the relationship between judgmental conceptions of God and conservative moral and political attitudes.

Perhaps there is a natural connection between active and judgmental conceptions of God and conservative views, at least with regard to morality. We would expect an active and judgmental God to be opinionated concerning human behavior—in essence, unforgiving of sins and rewarding of virtues. Similarly, conservative moral attitudes, as reported in survey data, tend to take the form of clear statements condemning certain forms of behavior. In contrast, liberal perspectives often seek to account for the circumstances and consequences of certain behaviors. Therefore, conservative moral attitudes fit with the idea that God is condemnatory with regard to particular human behavior.

The same could not be said of political opinions. There appears no clear philosophical connection between the Republican Party platform and believing in an active God. In fact, African Americans tend to believe in a very active and judgmental God while remaining Democrat. They represent a major exception to the discovered religious-political trend in the United States and indicate that there are important historical, cultural, and economic reasons why certain political groups are favored for religious reasons. It is clear that the Republican Party has effectively attached its message and

identity to a particular conception of God. But the fact that most conservative Protestants voted for Jimmy Carter over Ronald Reagan in 1980 shows how quickly religious and political mergers can dissolve.¹⁴

With growing resentment between Americans and French over current events, our data provide another interesting issue to ponder. To what extent do images of God create fundamentally different worldviews and endanger political dialogue? In other words, do the religious differences between Americans and the French uncover a division so deep within the worldviews of both populations that they may be irreconcilable? This question could also be posed for differences within the U.S. population. Perhaps this is a question of primacy. Do behaviors, moral attitudes, and political opinions necessarily follow from the individual's image of God? This is difficult to answer. Worldviews are complex bundles of many different ideas and opinions and get altered based on experiences, new information, and new social ties. Within systems of socialization it is impossible to grant primacy to any one aspect of a bundle of ideas and opinions which constitutes a worldview. Nevertheless, our research finds that certain bundles are more common than others.

In sum, we offer the following general rule: to the extent that individuals imagine God to be a judgmental and watchful deity, they will be more alert and obedient to what they believe God wants. In both the United States and France this proves to be true; images of God impact church attendance and influence one's moral attitudes concerning a host of behaviors. In addition, one's perception of God predicts one's political affiliation in the United States. God matters and lies at the heart of philosophical, ethical, and political differences in the world. Whether you view this as a good or bad thing probably also depends on your image of God.

Notes

1 Using data from the 1998 General Social Survey, we find that nearly half of those with a belief in God can still have their faith shaken by world events. Approximately 49 percent (49.4) of those who believe in God report that personal suffering has caused them to doubt their faith at least sometimes. About 47 percent (47.4) have had their faith shaken on occasion by evil in the world.

2 Current poll statistics indicate that around 95 percent of the American population believes in God. See George Bishop, "The Polls—Trends: Americans' Belief in God," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 63 (1999): 421–434.

3 Ibid.

4 Several contemporary studies on the effects of religious belief have indicated that religious concepts impact a wide variety of outcomes, from attitudes about gender roles, corporal punishment, and violence to how children view their parents and whether parents hug and praise their children or yell at them.

5 For a discussion of gods in Buddhism, see Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 90.

6 Rodney Stark, *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 20.

7 See Georg Simmel, "Religion and the Contradictions in Life," in *Essays on Religion*, trans. Horst Jürgen Helle (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 53.

8 Roger Finke and Amy Adamczyk, "Explaining Morality: The Influence of National Religious Context," p. 30. Presented at the 2003 meeting of the American Sociological Association.

9 See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 24.

10 Since 1972, the National Opinion Research Center has conducted a nationwide survey of a random sample of U.S. citizens on a near-yearly basis—the General Social Survey (GSS). In addition to gathering detailed demographic information on respondents, the GSS gathers opinions on a wide variety of topics, such as the role of government in public life, controversial issues such as abortion, confidence in public institutions, and a host of others. Of course, respondents are unlikely to spend five hours completing a survey so, in order to gather data on a broad range of issues, the GSS has adopted the practice of rotating groups of questions into and out of the survey in different years.

11 These six items were standardized (transformed into z-scores) and then summed to create the final image

of God measure (alpha = .62).

12 The International Social Survey Program enables us to replicate U.S. analyses of image of God in seven other countries. They are Australia, France, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, New Zealand, and the Slovak Republic.

13 The specific statistics and models will be presented in a series of more methodologically oriented articles written by Christopher Bader and Paul Froese to appear in a number of social scientific journals in the next few months.

14 Robert D. Woodberry et al., "Evangelicals and Politics: Surveying a Contemporary Mason-Dixon Line." Presented at the American Sociological Association, New York, 1996.

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