

The Spiritual Personalities of the Brain

When a team of sociologists at Baylor University asked a nationally representative sample of Americans to describe which qualities symbolized their impression of God, they discovered that four distinct personalities emerged. These four tell us a great deal about our religious landscape, but they also illuminate the inner neurological landscape of the American soul. According to the Baylor research, some see God as loving and benevolent, but twice as many Americans see God as punitive and stern. Some see God as distant and unconcerned, but many experience God as being actively involved in their lives. In fact, 20 percent even believe that God favors a specific political party.

When they put the data together, the Baylor researchers concluded that the Americans sampled tended to embrace one of four different personalities of God: authoritarian, critical, distant, or benevolent. Those who believe in an authoritarian God represent 32 percent of America. They believe that God is very angry and willing to punish anyone who is unfaithful or who acts in an ungodly way. People who embrace an authoritarian God attend church more often and nearly half believe in the literal truth of the Bible, which helps to reinforce the image of a wrathful, punitive God. More than 60 percent of American born-again Christians and Catholics believe they will “suffer negative consequences if they disobey their religion.”

Another 16 percent of Americans believe that God is critical but will neither punish nor comfort his flock; He does not intervene with the world, but He will cast judgment on people in the afterlife. The second largest group, comprising 24 percent of the American population, sees God as distant and uninvolved; we are left to our own free will and God is less of a person and more like a cosmic force that set the laws of nature into motion. Those who perceive God as distant have higher levels of income and education than any other group. Almost half never go to church, and 38 percent never pray. In contrast, only 2 percent of those who believe in an authoritarian God never pray, which poses the question: Does a fear of God make one want to pray more often?

In contrast to 72 percent of Americans who believe in an authoritarian, critical, or distant God, only 23 percent see God as gentle, forgiving, and less likely to respond with wrath. Their God is very active in their lives, cares deeply about the suffering of others, but sometimes causes suffering and pain. Since most of the Old Testament describes a wrathful God, this may be a primary reason why so few people see God as a symbol of eternal love. As neuroscientist, Andrew Newberg, M.D. explains in [How God Changes Your Brain](#), “To see God as primarily loving a person must embrace a liberal interpretation of the Bible, ignoring or rejecting the vindictive passages.”

The personality you assign to God has distinct neural patterns that correlate with our own emotional styles of behavior. According to the Baylor study, most of those who embrace an authoritarian God tend to favor the death penalty, want to spend more money on the military, want to give the government more power to fight terrorism, and insist that prayer should be allowed in public schools. Envisioning an authoritarian or critical entity – be it another person or God – will activate the limbic areas of the brain that generate fear and anger. However, when you perceive God as a benevolent

force, a different part of the brain is stimulated in the prefrontal cortex. Loving, compassionate images, faces, or thoughts activate a circuit that involves a tiny area in the front part of your brain called the anterior cingulate.

It conveniently sits between the limbic and prefrontal structures, and when stimulated, it suppresses the impulse to get angry or frightened, and helps generate feelings of empathy toward others who are suffering or hurt. The anterior cingulate performs many essential functions related to assessing social situations. It detects when people lie, and it helps orchestrate strategies for handling conflicts. It reduces anxiety, fear, guilt, and anger, and is involved in learning, memory, and focused attention. The anterior cingulate is strengthened by meditation which explains why meditation is effective in generating greater social awareness and compassion. The anterior cingulate is sometimes referred to as the true “heart of your neurological soul,” and when this part of the brain is activated, you will feel greater tolerance and acceptance toward others who hold different beliefs. The God of the limbic system is a frightening God, but the God of the anterior cingulate is loving.

In the four personalities described in the Baylor study, God maintains an “otherness” in the mind of the believer. Neurologically, activity in the parietal lobe is responsible for maintaining this quality of otherness about God. The parietal lobe makes God an object that has a specific location in the universe, separate from oneself. The religious philosopher Martin Buber believed that one must maintain an “I-Thou” separateness and otherness in order to have a personal interaction with God, and this makes perfect neurological sense. Other forms of contemplative meditation and neurofeedback decrease parietal activity, which allows the practitioner to feel more unified with God. God, then, appears to be everywhere and nowhere, a formless energy, both universal and unique.

Many responders talked about God as an emotional presence, using words like *peace*, *energy*, *tranquility*, or *bliss*. God was not a separate entity, but rather a force that permeated everything. God didn’t create the universe; God *was* the universe, a radiance that extended throughout time and space. God was light, God was freedom, and for many God was consciousness itself. People who embrace this type of God are often attracted to religious groups that fall outside of mainstream denominations, and often see different religions as reflections of a single underlying spiritual truth. Eleven percent of Americans appear to believe that God is “a state of higher consciousness that a person may reach.” Eight percent define God as “the total realization of personal, human potential,” and three percent believe that each person is God.

Overall, it’s fair to estimate that a quarter to one-third of all Americans believe in a nontraditional mystical God that is neither authoritarian, critical, nor distant. In fact, the percentages may be even higher because there are many members of traditional religious groups who also embrace a unitary vision of God. And if you include the spiritual practices of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Sikhism, Jainism, Sufism, Baha’i, Shinto, and others, the mystical God emerges as the primary spiritual belief system in the world, with over two billion followers and believers.