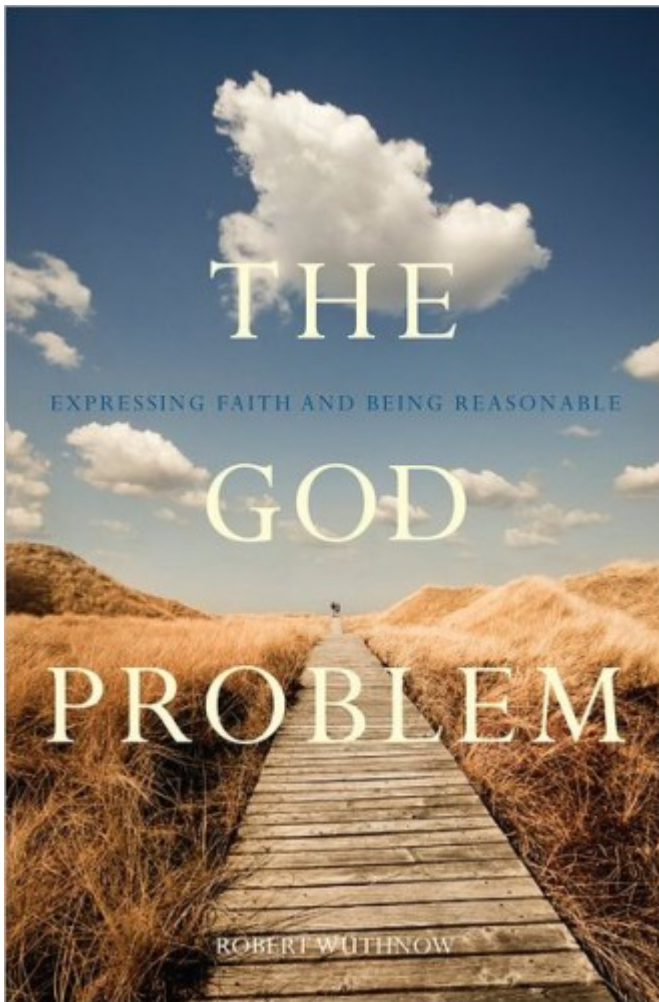


How we talk about God

by [Jerome P. Baggett](#) in the [December 12, 2012](#) issue

## In Review



### **The God Problem**

By Robert Wuthnow

University of California Press

For nearly four decades, Princeton University sociologist Robert Wuthnow has proved himself to be an indispensable and unwaveringly astute guide to America's variegated, ever-shifting religious landscape. Generational changes and religious

socialization, money and work, religious diversity and culture wars, the promise and perils of religious institutions, volunteerism and civic organizations, music and the arts, small groups and community, regional and global connections—even a cursory listing of his books' topics indicates that he has left little of this terrain unexplored. And yet with each new foray therein, he comes equipped with what his colleague Peter Berger once called the first wisdom of sociology: "Things are not what they seem."

Such is the case with *The God Problem*. Based largely on conversations that Wuthnow's research team had with 165 middle-class Americans about God and faith, it advocates and peerlessly demonstrates the importance of listening closely. It may seem to some observers, especially those who believe in American exceptionalism, that religious faith comes relatively easily to most Americans. To others, such as the so-called new atheists, faith seems instead to be increasingly untenable for educated people. But the careful listener will discover that things are not what they seem. Most Americans are quite religious, says Wuthnow, but they also have a "God problem": in today's pluralistic context, they must do the cultural work of consolidating and articulating their faith in ways that do not come off as either unacceptably dogmatic or as unenlightened.

How should we interpret this problem? Does it generate a kind of religion lite—a watered down, domesticated version of faith? It may seem so to those bent on comparing the present situation with that of a golden, romanticized past. Or is it an unresolvable problem that points to an inevitable religionless future in which the dubiousness of theological claims comes to be more widely acknowledged? This may seem about right to observers who equate modernization with nothing more than secularization. But, once again, for Wuthnow things are not what they seem. Where others detect less authentic religion or the waning of religion, he leans in more closely, listens more intently and hears example after example of religion's adaptability.

This is because religious faith is expressed in language, and, Wuthnow insists, the contexts within which its idioms are deployed "are never hermetically sealed." Rather, people's use of religious language is always shaped and reshaped by the other speech communities in which they participate—in the home, at work, among friends, via mass media and so forth. To be a mature, intelligent person means to be a competent speaker within this broader discursive world and thus able to communicate effectively with people holding divergent worldviews. For religious

people, it means having internalized the norms of reasonableness that enable one to be understood by others, to avoid being cast as a fanatic and to affirm one's faith at the same time.

Well-educated Americans "have found a way of having their cake and eating it too," Wuthnow writes. In a country where the taken-for-granted epistemology is highly naturalistic and thus renders belief in God problematic, they have reconfigured their religious language in terms of reasonableness, and in doing so, they have retained a place for the supernatural in their everyday lives.

This is the book's primary thesis, which Wuthnow unfolds with remarkable nuance. He devotes the volume's five central chapters to demonstrating how educated Americans think and talk about prayer, catastrophic events, heaven, Jesus and connections between science and faith. For each of these topics, Wuthnow teases out the subtle "language devices" that allow the interviewees both to denote the uncertainties about God that reasonable people are likely to have and to express their most deeply held religious convictions.

Consider a few of the language devices people draw on when discussing their prayer lives. Rather than attributing specific actions to God (claims that could be assailed by skeptics), many opt to make ontological assertions about God. "I just acknowledge God," says one Baptist woman whose daily morning prayer illustrates this inflection, "and give him affirmation of who he is and his presence in me."

A second language device, the contingency referent, frames divine action as contingent on human action and thus provides an explanation for what may otherwise be taken as God's failure to act. A good example here is a Muslim woman who firmly believes that one should pray to God for what one needs. "God is going to provide it," she insists. But she is quick to add, shifting the onus to herself, "It's not that he's going to give it to me in my hand. I have to struggle to get it."

Yet another language device that many people rely on is code switching. They discuss prayer in ways that suggest God's regular intervention in the natural world, but then backpedal by shifting to more metaphorical or ambiguous terminology. For instance, a Catholic woman employed as a registered nurse says that she prays every day, but not necessarily for her patients' health. "It is just being open and present to them, and just kind of being in tune with them," she explains. "It is a connection between another individual and your awareness of the spirit between

you and the sharing of that.”

As the conversations continue and deepen, readers meet more people like these three women and discover more language devices. In the process, they get a close-up look at how social context shapes people’s religious language, which in turn shapes their understanding and experience of the sacred.

No doubt many readers will have challenging questions for Wuthnow. Despite his nimble analysis, many of the quotations from his interview subjects give the impression that they have traded the God problem for what many may see as a problematic God. Readers may question whether these Americans’ strategy of being reasonable trumps their expressing faith in anything that could rightly be described as God. Contrary to Wuthnow’s interpretation, some scholars will conclude that the conversations he recounts support a strong secularization thesis. To many religious leaders the conversations may seem to indicate the difficulty of passing on a faith tradition. And to the atheist critics who partly inspired Wuthnow’s project, the conversations will likely smack of educated Americans’ last-ditch prevarications before they let go of God altogether.

However one might respond to such readers, Wuthnow’s work reminds us not only that things are not what they seem, but that distinguishing between what seems to be and what truly is the case is best accomplished through the very sort of careful listening that Wuthnow has done for this important book.