The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life recently released survey findings indicating Americans are largely ignorant about religion. The questions were very basic and related to all religion, not just the affiliation of any individual responder.

I wasn't surprised by the results. I've watched Jay Leno ask the simplest religious questions of random passers-by on the street who seem to guess "Mickey Mouse" at every turn. Many of them appear to have never given the subject much thought and view religion as irrelevant. However, two sociologists from Baylor have published a book indicating most Americans have a concept of the divine, whether one is religious or not. Many may not even know they have a god-concept.

From one religion to the next, the divine has been conceived of in myriad ways. Eastern and Western hemispheres provide broad religious groupings, the latter being largely Abrahamic; Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The three view God as a person of some sort with a degree of human characteristics.

In "America's Four Gods," Paul Froese and Chris Bader lay out four categories of the divine they say sum up Americans' views.

They are Authoritative, Benevolent, Critical and Distant. The first three are concrete, while the fourth is abstract, viewing God as a pervasive universal life force. There is a detailed summary at USA Today's Web site where you can quiz yourself to see what category you fall under.

Here's a quick sketch of the descriptions:

The Authoritative God intervenes in human affairs but is abrasive. The Benevolent one is all heart, intervening with great compassion. The Critical God has an opinion about earthly matters but does not manipulate events. This God wound up the universe like a clock and let it go but will render judgement in the afterlife. Lastly, the Distant God is not a person and is impartial.

Theology is complicated and these descriptions fall miserably short. Many people's belief of God may not fall neatly in one box. However, the categories are a good starting place for introspection. They seek to answer the muddy questions of divine intervention. They rank one's concept of God on a scale from "intervenes" to "intervenes a little" to "doesn't intervene" in our lives. Froese and Bader draw connections between one's view of God and one's use of money, as well as morality and other things. How one views God also relates to how we view government and the role we assign it.

Political camps could be labeled as "hard left," "soft left," "soft right" and "hard right." I would bet most people have some idea of where they stand politically but I wonder if one has correlated it with their personal view of God.

Without a doubt, those on the hard right have an authoritative view of the divine. I think that's obvious. The authors say most who share this view are men, while women tend to view God more benevolently.

This benevolent theology seems to correspond to an emphasis on compassion in public life. Those with a benevolent god-concept tend to embrace the idea that we are here to help each other. They may fall among the soft left or soft right approach to governing, depending on their mix of public and private cooperation. Either way, the Golden Rule sets the tone for their socio-political engagement. You could also fall into this category and be completely secular.

Those on the soft right expect to be God's hands, while the hard right thinks a heavenly savior is coming. Either way, both tend to look to religious communities (and community in general) more than government.

Those who believe God is either Critical or Distant are more likely to be on the political left. Many on the hard left seem to look to government alone to fix problems. The persons in question may believe there is no creator of any kind and hold to it as dogmatically as the most rigid religious adherents. For some, Communism and Atheism go hand-in-hand. Either way, these folks look to the machine because nobody is coming to our rescue from out of the cosmos.

How one views the divine can shed light on voting patterns. Conversely, voting patterns can shed light on one's god-concept. This may be particularly beneficial to those who have never thought about it.

Again, this is a quick sketch concerning the basics of a very complex subject matter. There are numerous exceptions to this basic blueprint. This column is not intended to offer any opinions or insight. That is for you to find; I simply wanted to draw attention to a meaningful issue. You can contemplate it from here.