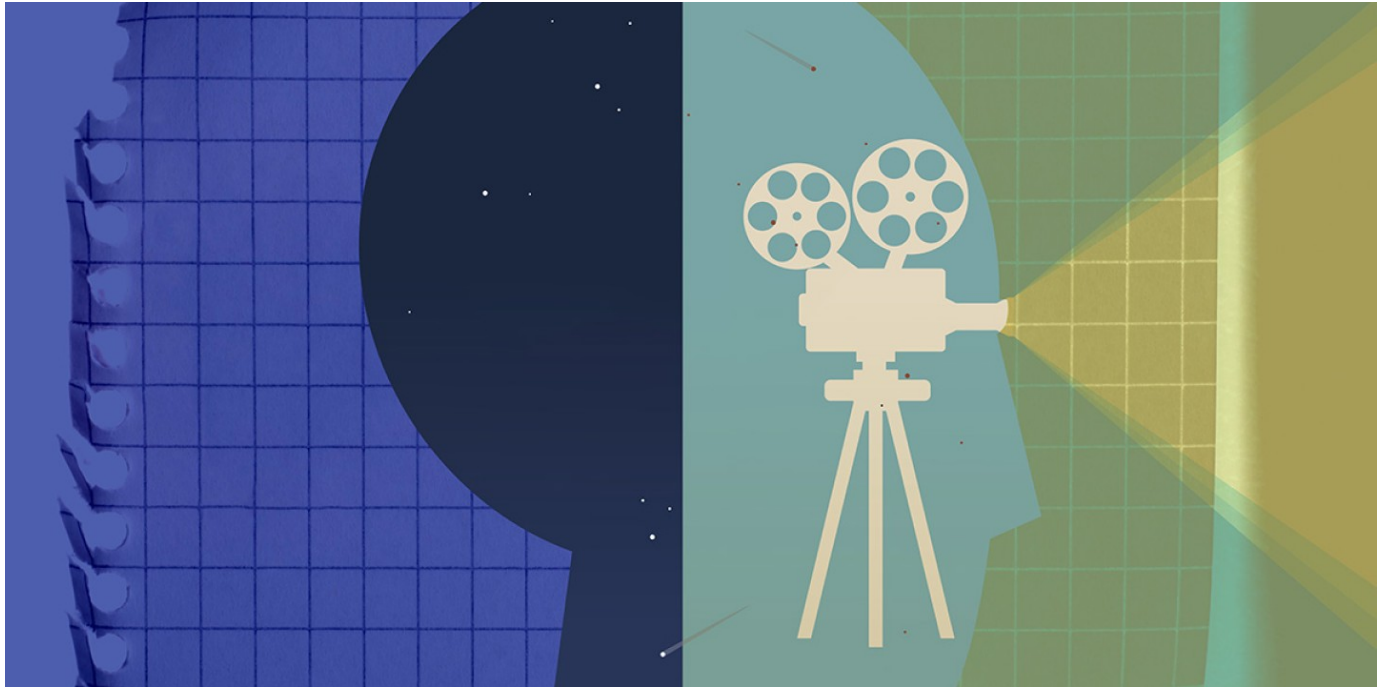


American Christians tend to imagine a God who thinks and looks like us

How do you see the face we cannot see?

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [October 20, 2021](#) issue



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“You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” That word of God spoken to Moses has hardly kept Christians from imagining what God looks like. Such imagining is what prompted a team of psychologists at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to study how contemporary American Christians visualize the face of God. More than 500 participants viewed hundreds of pairs of faces side by side on a screen, each selecting those that most reflected how they imagined God’s appearance to be. The pairs of faces evaluated represented the collective demographics of the US population in terms of age, race, and gender.

Not surprisingly, the personal biases and motivations of participants influenced the way they perceived the appearance of God. Their perceptions mostly reflected their own political and socioeconomic orientation. Conservative Americans in the group favored images of an older, sterner, more masculine God—a God who would safeguard the present social order. Liberal Americans, by contrast, identified a

younger, kinder, more feminine God in their selected facial images. These images for God, they presumed, were more suited to promoting societal tolerance.

In light of the tendency of many Christians to project their idea of God's mind onto the face of God, researchers introduced nine dimensions of variance as a measure of God's appearance: age, gender, attractiveness, race, perceived wealth, intelligence, happiness, lovingness, and powerfulness. Conservatives viewed God as more powerful, wealthier, and whiter than their liberal counterparts did.

That we regularly project our beliefs and traits onto others is undisputed. Projecting the same onto God's appearance is apparently no different. We're inclined to believe in a God who not only thinks like us but also looks like us.

Social scientists call this molding of personal perspective around preexisting feelings and beliefs *motivated reasoning*. In most realms we inhabit, we're motivated to embrace information that supports our beliefs and sense of identity while rejecting information that contradicts it. Motivated reasoning, which often happens outside of conscious awareness, helps explain, for example, how Americans view economic inequality between people of different races. Those who enjoy relatively high income or status, and who have little interaction across race and class lines, are motivated to believe society is remarkably fair.

Recognizing how tough it can be for any of us to revise our feelings or accept reasoning that contradicts our cherished assumptions is why I love to open the *Christian Century*. [This issue](#) is no exception. I've never thought of [the kingdom of heaven as a library](#) or of [resonance as a word for rethinking my life](#). Have you? I've never had to face [what Black girls face in school](#) or [what those who live without housing think about religion](#). That's but a sampling.

Theologian Patrick Henry once told of his mother-in-law accidentally confusing the words of her grace before dinner. Instead of asking God to "make us ever mindful of the needs of others," she asked God to "make us ever needful of the minds of others." That's one role the *Century* can play for all of us, I pray.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The God we see."