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AMERICAN GRACE

How Religion Divides and Unites Us

Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell

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A GROUND BREAKING EXAMINATION OF RELIGION IN AMERICA

Robert Putnam changed the way we think about the fabric of American society with his hugely influential 2000 bestseller, *Bowling Alone*. Now, the renowned Harvard political scientist, along with coauthor David Campbell of Notre Dame, will change the way we think about religion in America with *AMERICAN GRACE: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (Simon & Schuster; October 5, 2010; \$30.00). Drawing on the two most comprehensive surveys ever conducted on religion and public life in America (specially commissioned for this book) and a dozen in-depth portraits of diverse congregations, Putnam and Campbell go to the heart of the religious issues roiling our society.

In this monumental, fascinating, and often surprising study, the authors examine the complex interaction of religion and politics over the past half-century and provide a nuanced balance sheet of how religion both contributes to and detracts from the vibrancy and stability of American democracy. They analyze how the current alliance between religion and conservative politics was built, and sketch the possible outlines of a completely different political-religious alignment. Moreover, they address the great puzzle of religion in the United States, which is largely unrecognized by most Ameri-

"Whether you are a fervent believer or just a curious observer, you have a great deal to learn from Putnam and Campbell's masterful survey of contemporary American religious life. Their expansive vision, authoritative evidence, insightful analysis, and graceful prose make *American Grace* a terrific example of how social science can contribute to a broader understanding of our most vital social institutions and commitments."

—Larry M. Bartels, author of *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*

"*American Grace* offers a cogent and insightful analysis of the role of religion in American public life. Covering a wide range of topics, from religious pluralism to political polarization, it describes both the perils—and promise—of contemporary faith-based politics. Putnam and Campbell have made a major contribution to understanding this crucial subject."

—John C. Green, Distinguished Professor of Political Science, University of Akron; Senior Research Advisor, Pew Forum on Religions & Public Life

"Putnam and Campbell have produced an impressive interpretation of American religion that is likely to be debated for years to come. Eschewing dry theoretical speculation and cant punditry, *American Grace* paints a compelling portrait of the centrality of religion in American culture and

offers a provocative narrative of how it is changing.”

—Robert Wuthnow, chairman, Dept. of Sociology, Princeton University

“For anyone interested in the role of religion in America’s civic life, Robert Putnam and David Campbell’s *American Grace* is a must read. Their findings from rich case studies and sophisticated analysis of original national surveys will be of great value to academics, politicians, community organizers, religious and non-religious leaders, and American citizens who wonder about why and how religion continues to matter so much in American civic and private life.” — Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, President Emeritus of Notre Dame
“Religion is perhaps the most significant but little understood force in American life, and this new book goes a long way toward illuminating how faith affects our politics and our culture. As ever, Robert Putnam has produced an original and thought-provoking work.”

—Jon Meacham, Editor of *Newsweek* and author of *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation*

“This is the best overview of American religion in the last half century that I have ever read. Sophisticated but accessible, it contains a treasure trove of fascinating information: why religious Americans are better neighbors and more conscientious citizens than their secular counterparts; what role personal sexual morality plays in American religion; and why so many young Americans are drifting away from religious tradition. And despite some sobering findings, it continually reminds us of the vibrancy, strength and diversity of America’s congregations and of our religious culture. If you care about American religion, you must read this book.”

—Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, President, Union for Reform Judaism

“I love this book. *American Grace* is a monumental work, an elegant narrative built on a solid foundation of massive research. This surprising, absolutely fascinating, and ultimately uplifting portrait of the changing role of religion in American life deserves the widest possible audience. It is a triumph.”

—Doris Kearns Goodwin, Historian

“*American Grace* is an instant canonical text. It is indispensable for any grasp of our pluralistic religious culture. And it inspires us to deepen our ecumenical democracy!”

—Cornel West, Professor of Religion, Center for African American Studies, Princeton University

cans because they have never known another reality: America is unusually religious, unusually diverse religiously, and yet unusually tolerant. In most countries, intense religiosity combined with stark religious differences equals wars, violence, and civil disorder. Why, the authors ask, have we not torn ourselves apart along the religious fault lines that have increasingly come to divide us?

Debunking myths and offering eye-opening insights, Putnam and Campbell present dozens of groundbreaking findings, including:

- There is a growing “God gap” in American politics between the highly devout, who have overwhelmingly aligned themselves with the Republican Party, and the less religious, who generally support the Democrats. Contrary to the suspicions of many secular Americans, however, there is relatively little explicit politicking in American congregations; likewise, political mobilization at church is rare. And to the extent that there is political activity driven from the pulpit, it is more common in liberal congregations than in conservative ones.

- Increasingly, it appears that Americans have been switching their religion to match their politics – rather than the other way around. Among the politically committed, the conservatives have migrated toward the most theologically conservative congregations, while liberals have become less religious and more secular.

- The third largest “religious” group in the United States is actually made up of the 17 percent of the population that has no religious affiliation at all – an astonishing historical development in this very religious nation. The “nones” now outnumber America’s longtime majority of mainline Protestants, who now comprise only 14 percent of the population.

- Most Americans want religion kept out of direct involvement in politics, but they want religious leaders to speak out on matters of broad public concern.

- Most Americans (including secular Americans) believe that people who are personally religious are more trustworthy and make better leaders.

- Abortion and same-sex marriage are highly effective rallying points for religious conservatives – but opposition to premarital sex is the very glue that holds together the Religious Right.

- Today’s young people of the Millennial Generation are more opposed to abortion than their Baby Boomer parents, despite being the most secular swath of the population, with a remarkable 25 percent having no religious affiliation. Whether secular or religious, however, young Americans are also highly accepting of homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Over time, it is difficult to see how the political “coalition of the religious” can stay together if secular voters have qualms about abortion and religious voters endorse same-sex marriage.

- Almost half of all Americans typically say grace before meals, while the other half almost never does. Saying grace turns out to be a strong predictor of political and social views, including how people vote.

- Religious Americans are better neighbors than secular Americans. They volunteer at much higher rates for both religious and secular causes, give more money to religious and secular chari-

“This marvelous study combines clear-eyed, elegantly written analysis with new and fascinating data to provide as rich a picture as you could wish for of the place of religion in our contemporary life. It undermines, in small and large ways, many of the clichés about politics and religion in America. This book will be an essential part of the continuing conversation about faith in our country.”

—Kwame Anthony Appiah, Professor of Philosophy, Princeton, and author of *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*

AMERICAN GRACE: How Religion Divides and Unites Us

By Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell

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ties, and are roughly twice as engaged in their communities as comparable secular Americans. And they do more everyday good deeds: they're more likely to donate blood, help someone find a job, give money to a homeless person, or even let a stranger cut in front of them. The reason for this is not their theology, but the friendships they make through their congregations. Having religious friends is more important than simply having friends and being religious yourself. In other words, religious networks are “supercharged” in their effect on neighborliness.

- One downside of religion's effect on public life is that religious Americans are consistently less tolerant of dissent and less supportive of civil liberties than secular Americans. Secular Americans are more tolerant of fundamentalists than religious Americans are tolerant of atheists.
- America peacefully combines a high degree of religious devotion with tremendous religious diversity. In other countries – from Iran to India, Northern Ireland, Sudan, and the former Yugoslavia – this dynamic often leads to sectarian violence and civil strife. How can America's religious pluralism coexist with its religious polarization?
- The answer, the authors say, lies in America's high degree of inter-religious mingling or “bridging” (including within the authors' own families). Most Americans, even the most devout, have intimate friends and loved ones of many different faiths and none, and it is hard to demonize people you love. That is the American grace of the book's title.

RELIGIOUS POLARIZATION AND THREE SEISMIC SOCIETAL SHOCKS

As the data from the authors' Faith Matters surveys from 2006 and 2007 show, Americans are increasingly concentrated at two opposite ends of the religious spectrum—the highly religious of many faiths at one pole, and the avowedly secular at the other. The moderate, essentially nonpolitical religious middle that dominated America's religious landscape in the decades immediately following World War II is shrinking.

But the nation's religious polarization has not been a process of smoothly proceeding change, the authors say. Rather, it has resulted from three seismic societal shocks. The first was the socially tumultuous, sexually libertine 1960s, when religious observance drastically declined, especially among the young. This turbulent period then produced a prudish aftershock of growth in conservative religion, especially evangelical Protestantism, and its vastly increased presence in the cultural and political arena. As theological and political conservatism began to converge, religiously flavored issues like abortion and homosexuality emerged on the national agenda, and “religion” became increasingly associated with the Republican Party. But that expansive evangelicalism peaked in the early 1990s.

According to Putnam and Campbell, the first aftershock was followed by a second aftershock, whose effects are still unfolding

and have the potential to fundamentally reshape America's religious and political landscape. In this second aftershock, a growing and unprecedented number of Americans, especially young people, have come to disavow religion entirely. For many, their aversion to religion is rooted in unease with the association between religion and conservative politics. If religion equals Republican, they have decided that religion is not for them.

But as Putnam and Campbell found, only a tiny percentage of Americans who claim no religious affiliation see themselves as atheists. Many consider themselves spiritual and stand on the edge of a religious tradition, with one foot in and one foot out. Against this rapidly shifting backdrop, there is an opportunity for religious "entrepreneurs" to develop new expressions of faith that will respond to changing times and engage new types of worshippers, as American religion has repeatedly done throughout our history. The "emerging" church profiled by Putnam and Campbell has attracted young people by combining modern technology with traditional symbolism and an emphasis on good works rather than theology. But the future of this new movement remains unclear. In the political sphere, there is an opportunity for the Democrats to reclaim the religious mantle and for Republicans to recalibrate their relationship to religion, enabling either party to build a new governing coalition. For religion will surely continue to influence our politics, and vice versa—the only question is how.

RELIGION AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN AMERICA

How, Putnam and Campbell ask, has religion influenced and been influenced by the extraordinary social changes that have taken place in America over the past fifty years—including the civil rights movement, the feminist revolution, increased immigration and ethnic diversity, and growing income inequality? Again, the answers are intriguing and often unexpected. For example:

- The feminist revolution of the last generation has swept as rapidly through the ranks of religious men and women as it did through the ranks of secular Americans. Nevertheless, highly religious Americans maintain somewhat more traditional attitudes toward gender roles.
- Religious Americans, especially evangelicals, are more likely to have friends of a lower social class than are secular Americans. On the other hand, religious Americans are also less likely than their secular counterparts to favor public policies to address poverty and inequality.
- Church attendance among middle- and upper-middle-class American whites has increased, while it has decreased among working-class whites.
- Religiosity is not a predictor of racial attitudes. Just as religious Americans largely have come to accept working women, they have also overwhelmingly come to accept racial equality. However, religious Americans in the South from rural areas and small towns have significantly less progressive racial attitudes.
- Religion and ethnicity have long been, and continue to be, strongly linked, even among white Americans whose families have been here for generations. People who have a strong sense of religious identity also tend to have a strong ethnic identity.
- African Americans are the second-most religious group in America (just behind Mormons), and overwhelmingly belong to a distinctive Black Protestant tradition. Black Americans are an anomaly, however, in that they are one of the very few religious groups who are strongly religious and consistently liberal in their political beliefs.
- Asian Americans are the least religious of all American racial groups, and also have a relatively weak sense of ethnic identity.
- Latinos (whether in the Catholic majority or Protestant minority) rank very high on the religiosity scale, and also have a strong sense of ethnic identity.
- While most American churchgoers belong to racially homogeneous congregations, the most racially diverse congregations are Catholic parishes (owing to the influx of Latinos) and Christian evangelical megachurches.

THE RELIGIOUS MIXING BOWL

In the authors' view, the First Amendment is part of the explanation for America's high degree of religious tolerance. With its guarantee of freedom of religion and prohibition of state support for religion, it has helped to foster an exceptionally vigorous religious "marketplace." But an even more important part of the explanation, Putnam and Campbell say, is that America has to a remarkable extent become a religious mixing bowl. Some of their most interesting findings concern the role of religion in the intimate daily lives of Americans, which faiths are gaining and losing members, and the ways that Americans of different faiths view one another, such as:

- Religious switching is extremely common. Roughly 35-40 percent of all Americans and 40-45 percent of white Americans have switched religions at some point in their lives.

- Inter-faith marriage grew dramatically over the course of the twentieth century. Approximately one third of all married Americans are in an inter-faith marriage, and one half chose to marry someone of a different faith. (The difference is due to the conversion of spouses to one faith or the other, or sometimes the conversion of both spouses to a third faith.)
- We increasingly live next to and work with, as well as marry, people of other religions. As Americans make friends with people of minority religions, they become warmer not only toward members of that religion, but toward members of other minority religions, as well.
- The religious traditions that are losing the most adherents are mainline Protestants (including Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Congregationalists) and Catholics.
- Roughly 60 percent of Americans raised as Catholics are no longer practicing Catholics – approximately one third have left the church entirely, while another third are only nominally Catholic. No denomination in America has gone through more rapid or wrenching change.
- However, the overall share of the population that is Catholic (just under 25 percent) has held steady. For while “Anglo” Catholics (mainly the grandchildren of European immigrants) have been rushing out of one door, Latino Catholics have been entering through another.
- For Catholics aged 18-34, 59 percent are Latino. Catholicism in America is well on its way to becoming a majority-Latino religion. This transition is not taking place without tension, as some congregations experience strains between older English-speaking parishioners and younger Spanish-speaking ones.
- When Americans rate how they feel about members of other religions, Putnam and Campbell find:
 - * Most everyone likes mainline Protestants and Jews. Indeed, despite America’s history of harboring a considerable amount of anti-Semitism, Jews are the most broadly popular religious group in America today.
 - * Most everyone likes Catholics, more than Catholics like everyone else. This is another startling turnaround, given America’s long history of anti-Catholicism until the election of President John F. Kennedy.
 - * Evangelicals like everyone else more than everyone else likes them. Catholics and evangelicals rate each other warmly. (This is striking given the past history of animosities between these two groups.)
 - * Mormons like everyone else, while most everyone else dislikes Mormons. Jews are the exception, as they give Mormons a net positive rating. (This suggests that there is a perceived commonality, given that they are both minority religions.)
 - * Most everyone dislikes Muslims and Buddhists, even more so than Mormons. Jews, however, are extremely warm toward Buddhists, while cool toward Muslims.
- In spite of these differences in how religions are perceived, Americans have a remarkably high level of religious tolerance. Eighty-nine percent of Americans – including 83 percent of evangelical Christians – believe that a person who is not of their religion can go to heaven. A large majority of Americans maintain this belief, even when the overwhelming majority who are Christian are specifically asked if non-Christians can go to heaven.

CONGREGATIONAL CLOSE-UPS

The book’s vividly written “congregational vignettes” offer detailed close-ups of a wide variety of congregations, located all around the United States and representing each of America’s largest religious traditions. They not only complement the conclusions drawn from the data, but capture the rich texture of religious life in America as it is actually lived by flesh-and-blood people. Included are two Christian evangelical megachurches (one in southern California and the other in Minneapolis), two contrasting Episcopal parishes in greater Boston, a Mormon congregation in suburban Salt Lake City, a Lutheran congregation of German heritage in Houston, an African Methodist Episcopal church in Baltimore, a group of Catholic parishes in the Chicago area, and a liberal Jewish synagogue in suburban Chicago. In recent years, the bestseller lists have been filled with books highly critical of religion, which have been answered by equally fierce rebuttals from religion’s defenders. Meanwhile, television’s talking heads and talk radio’s provocateurs use heated, hyperbolic language as they seize upon religious controversies to stoke America’s purported “culture wars.” Neither an apology for religion nor an attack upon it, AMERICAN GRACE provides a balanced and considered counterweight to this polemical rhetoric as it presents an illuminating and penetrating assessment of both the pros and the cons of religion as lived in America today. Fact-based and fair-minded, it aspires to explain religious Americans to secular Americans, secular Americans to religious Americans, and religious Americans to one another. All parties in the ongoing debate about religion, atheism, and politics in America will be both captivated and challenged by it.



(from left to right – David E. Campbell & Robert D. Putnam)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The London Sunday Times has called Robert D. Putnam “the most influential academic in the world today.” The Peter and Isabel Malkin Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University, he is the author or coauthor of more than a dozen previous books, translated into twenty languages, including the bestselling *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* and *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*, a study of new forms of social connectedness. He has worked on these themes with Barack Obama, Bill and Hillary Clinton, and George W. Bush, as well as with British Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and many other national leaders and grassroots activists around the world. He is the founder of the Saguro Seminar, which brings together leading thinkers and practitioners from across America to develop actionable ideas for civic renewal. His writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Economist*, *USA Today*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Boston Globe*, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, and many other publications. Raised in a small town in the Midwest and educated at Swarthmore, Oxford, and Yale, he has served as Dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. He is a member of the National Academy of Sciences, the British Academy, the American Philosophical Society, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and is a past president of the American Political Science Association. A recipient of the Skytte Prize, the most prestigious international award for scholarly achievement in political science, he lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

David E. Campbell is the John Cardinal O’Hara, C.S.C. Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame and the founding director of the Rooney Center for the Study of American Democracy. He is the acclaimed author of *Why We Vote: How Schools and Communities Shape Our Civic Life* and the editor of *A Matter of Faith: Religion in the 2004 Presidential Election*. An expert on religion, politics, and public policy, he has been featured in the national media, including *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *NBC News*, *CNN*, *National Public Radio*, *Fox News*, and *C-SPAN*. He has won the Schattschneider Award from the American Political Science Association and is a two-time winner of the APSA annual prize for the best paper on religion and politics. He lives near South Bend, Indiana.