


# Religion in America

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Peter Berkowitz on American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us by Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, with the assistance of Shaylyn Romney Garrett.

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Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, with the assistance of Shaylyn Romney Garrett. American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us. Simon and Schuster. 688 Pages. \$30.00.

To the detriment of its pedagogical and scholarly mission, political science has increasingly circumscribed its domain. At the center of the discipline today one finds ever more elaborate formal modeling of politics, and ever more technical measurement and manipulation of data. At the same time, political science models grow ever more remote from politics and ever less accessible to even engaged citizens and thoughtful office holders. And the investigations that dominate the work of political scientists increasingly focus on methodological issues and statistical puzzles for their own sake. Indeed, with every year it becomes more difficult to find in our leading political science departments courses for undergraduates that examine such basic matters of common concern as Congress, the presidency, and the courts. Our universities have turned out to be a fertile breeding ground of a new kind of political scientist who is not interested in politics.

Or not interested in politics as ordinarily understood. Of course there are honorable counterexamples and encouraging opposing trends, but it is astonishing how little time and energy the typical political scientist devotes to such topics as, say, the foundations of liberty, democracy, and capitalism, and the virtues on which they depend; the principles and design of good government; the change in political ideas and institutions over time; the use and abuse of political rhetoric; the conduct of diplomacy and war; and debates over the national interest and the crafting of policies and laws to advance it. Whereas every White House is staffed with economics professors who provide economics expertise, and law professors who provide legal expertise, rare is the political scientist these days on whom an administration calls to provide political expertise.

Religion is particularly neglected by political science. Here and there one finds distinguished exceptions. University of Akron professor John C. Green has done major work examining religious attitudes and opinions in America. And Jean Bethke Elshtain, a professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School trained in political theory, has clarified the contribution of religiously-inspired political actors and has brought to bear on the dilemmas of contemporary political life concepts and categories drawn from theology and faith. But by

and large — and notwithstanding the centrality of religion to human affairs and, over the past several decades, its renewed political significance at home and abroad — American political scientists neglect it.

In these circumstances, the publication of *American Grace* is a big event. It identifies, and applies sophisticated social science analysis to answer, important questions about religion in America. It hearkens back to an older kind of scholarship, in the spirit of hall of fame political scientists Robert Dahl, James Q. Wilson, and Samuel Huntington, who, different as their areas of expertise are, produced bodies of work which demonstrated that serious and systematic study that built on empirical research without fetishizing method could shed light on questions of interest to scholars, citizens, and officeholders alike.

*American Grace* is a collaborative work by rising star David Campbell, a professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame and author of *Why We Vote: How Schools and Communities Shape our Civic Life*, and the distinguished senior scholar Robert Putnam, a professor at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. It is very much in the spirit of Putnam's earlier writings, particularly *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (1993) and the bestselling *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (1996). In the former, Putnam examined Italian society and politics, focusing on how forming and maintaining civic associations generated social capital — “the norms of trust and reciprocity that arise out of social networks” — which, he argued, is a crucial ingredient of democratic self-government. In the latter, he explored changes in the propensity to associate in the United States, the resulting changes in the stocks of social capital, and the consequences for American democracy. In *American Grace*, Putnam and Campbell team up to assess how religion, in the words of their subtitle, “divides and unites us.” That anodyne formulation, however, conceals the striking overall finding of the book: Contrary to the common wisdom among professors and pundits, religion in these polarizing times does far more to unite Americans than to divide us.

The authors are accomplished empirical researchers, and their findings are primarily based on data derived from “The Faith Matters Survey,” which they themselves “designed, implemented, and analyzed.” Their data analysis is enriched by an impressive appreciation of American history, culture, and society. In addition, their book provides three long chapters of what they call vignettes — “thick descriptions,” in anthropologist Clifford Geertz's famous formulation — crafted by their colleague Shalyn Romney Garret, which vividly and sympathetically portray a variety of Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Mormon religious communities. The book's precisely etched accounts of the men and women who worship in these varied congregations is smoothly woven into the authors' overall data-driven argument about the social and political effects, mostly salutary, of religion in America. Their rare facility with both quantitative and qualitative analysis enhances the authors' handling of both.

Putnam and Campbell proceed from the observation that religion in America has long been exceptional, and in two striking respects: Religious devotion is greater in America than in any other advanced liberal democracy, and so is religious pluralism.

Since the 1960s, however, America has witnessed a growth in religious polarization:

Americans are increasingly concentrated at opposite ends of the religious spectrum — the highly religious at one pole, and the avowedly secular at the other. The moderate religious middle is shrinking. Contrast today's religious landscape with America in the decades following the Second World War, when moderate — or mainline — religion was booming. In the past, there were religious tensions, but they were largely between religions (Catholic v. Protestant most notably), rather than between the religious and irreligious. Today, America remains, on average, a highly religious nation, but that average obscures a growing secular swath of the population.

Given the growing divide in America between the religious and the secular, one might expect a flaring up of a culture war. And indeed, as Putnam and Campbell ruefully note, the conviction that America is rent by religiously driven culture war is determinedly propounded by leading social and political commentators and bestselling authors.

But the data tell a different story. And not only Putnam and Campbell's data. Their findings are consistent with those from the mid-1990s by sociologist Alan Wolfe in *One Nation, After All: What Americans Really Think About God, Country, Family, Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homosexuality, Work, the Right, the Left and each Other*, and in the last decade those from political scientists Morris P. Fiorina, Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope in *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. Both of these books showed that when one moves beyond elite discourse and examines ordinary Americans' lives and opinions, one discovers a majority of Americans with live-and-let-live habits and attitudes. Similarly, according to Putnam and Campbell, when one turns away from the dire pronouncements by intellectuals and politicians about the polarizing effects of religious faith and

looks instead at how Americans of different religious backgrounds interact, the United States hardly seems like a house divided against itself. America peacefully combines a high degree of religious devotion with tremendous religious diversity — including growing ranks of the nonreligious. Americans have a high degree of tolerance for those of (most) other religions, including those without any religion in their lives.

The puzzle for Putnam and Campbell is how America can combine exceptional religious devotion with exceptional religious diversity and nevertheless achieve exceptional toleration.

They proceed by setting the puzzle in historical context. The religious polarization of the present, they contend, is the result of one great shock and two aftershocks generated by the social and political tumult of the 1960s. The great shock was the sexual revolution, set in

motion in no small measure by the appearance in the mid-1960s of a cheap and reliable birth control pill. The authors report that “the fraction of all Americans believing that premarital sex was ‘not wrong’ doubled from 24 percent to 47 percent in the four years between 1969 and 1973 and then drifted upward through the 1970s to 62 percent in 1982.” This stunning reevaluation of established norms, accompanied and accelerated by the swift routinization of cohabitation before marriage and no-fault divorce, precipitated a crisis in confidence for all forms of established authority, including religious authority.

It also resulted in two aftershocks. The first, felt already in the 1970s, was a resurgence of religious faith. It is no accident, the authors point out, that in 1976 “America elected its first avowedly born again president.” The next two decades witnessed a marked rise in religiosity, with politically conservative Americans turning in large numbers to evangelical Protestant denominations, and evangelical Protestants entering politics as a significant force. The second aftershock, triggered by the first, hit in the 1990s. With the rise to political prominence of the Religious Right, many, especially among the young, rejected religion because, according to Putnam and Campbell, they increasingly tended to see it as “judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical, and too political.” Between 1990 and 2010, the number of Americans who had no religious preference rose from about 7 percent to about 17 percent, with the most dramatic increases among twenty-somethings.

These three shocks and the religious polarization that has resulted provide the backdrop against which Putnam and Campbell explore the changing faces of religion in post-1960s America. Across religions, the propensity of children to follow the faith of their parents has declined while intermarriage has risen. This has resulted in a significant increase in the importance of individual choice in determining religious affiliation, which in turn has spurred growth in “congregation shopping” among worshippers and the emergence of “religious entrepreneurs” among the clergy. As women have moved into the marketplace and won equal treatment under law, religious men and women have tended to “remain more traditionalist about gender roles than their contemporaries who are not in the pews, but they are less traditionalist than their religious counterparts had been a generation ago.” As the gaps between social and economic classes have widened, “among the American upper middle classes, those who are religiously observant are more likely to report friendship and social interaction with people on welfare or manual workers than comparably placed secular Americans.” But this has not, the authors note with regret, translated into concerted religiously inspired efforts to close the gap. And as ethnic diversity, fueled by immigration from Asia and Latin America, has increased, the data show “that religion and ethnicity often reinforce one another.” This is especially true of black Protestant churches — which, breaking the stereotype, unite intense traditional faith with strong allegiance to the Democratic Party. At the same time, the authors stress, “Americans of all religions and all levels of religiosity have become more racially tolerant.”

As for politics, Putnam and Campbell show that while there is a good deal of church in our politics, there is relatively little politics in our churches. They confirm, consistent with common observation, that with the notable exception of black Protestants the highly religious tend to be Republican, and the intensely secular Democratic. Of particular interest is their finding that the Republicans' "coalition of the religious" is grounded in "sex and family issues like abortion and same sex marriage." Because views on gay rights are liberalizing across the religious spectrum and abortion attitudes, which have shifted slightly in a conservative direction in recent years, seem to have become less a function of religion, the authors cautiously speculate that the conservative coalition of the religious may be vulnerable. Meanwhile, and contrary to most progressive intellectuals, the authors find in churches "that there is little overt politicking over America's pulpits and, to the extent it happens, it is more common on the political left than the right." Nor are churches active in organizing their congregants for partisan politics. But Putnam and Campbell do report that religious teachings — especially in relation to sex and family matters — have political implications that tend to be reinforced through religiously based friendships and associations and come to influence believers' political opinions.

In the final chapters, Putnam and Campbell argue that religion yields substantial indirect benefits to democracy in America. What George Washington claimed was true of America in the 18th century remains, in the authors' account, true today: Religion provides a vital support of democracy in America. Putnam and Campbell note that their findings contradict the popular claims of the "new atheists," polemically summed up in the subtitle of Christopher Hitchens's bestselling *God is Not Great*, that "religion poisons everything." In fact, the authors' convincingly demonstrate that religious Americans are generally "more generous neighbors and more conscientious citizens than their secular counterparts." Religious Americans volunteer more, give more money to charitable organizations, and are more likely to give money directly to strangers, family, and friends. In addition, religious Americans are more likely to belong to community organizations, lead community organizations, take part in local social and political life, and press for local social and political reform.

Strangely, Putnam and Campbell discount the role of belief in making the religious better neighbors and citizens. Indeed, they are uncharacteristically emphatic in insisting that beliefs are "utterly irrelevant to explaining the religious edge in good neighborliness." Instead, they maintain that their data show that the key factor is "religiously-based social ties." But their distinction cannot be sustained because religious friendships and communities are in part constituted and preserved by religious beliefs. Indeed it is hard to understand how the authors can simultaneously argue that religious beliefs about sex and family matters have practical, if indirect, political consequences while maintaining that religious beliefs — for example, the foundational belief in both Christianity and Judaism, that all human beings are created in God's image — have no bearing whatsoever on religious people's propensity to be better neighbors and citizens.

Religious toleration, according to the authors, is generally on the rise in the United States. Yet while relations between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews have never been better, not all interreligious tensions have been dissolved. Putnam and Campbell emphasize that one interreligious division, with implications for the 2012 elections, remains particularly potent — the tendency among evangelicals to hold negative views of Mormons. More generally, the authors report, “Three groups stand out for their unpopularity — Mormons, Buddhists, and Muslims.”

Yet when all is said and done, America is far from a house divided. Indeed, given America’s exceptional religious devotion and diversity, the degree of unity the country exhibits is remarkable. One factor, according to the authors, is civil religion or the generally nondenominational view, inscribed in the Declaration of Independence, that individual liberty and human equality are rooted in God’s creation. Another is the Constitution, the First Amendment of which both prohibits an establishment of religion and protects its free expression, thereby providing believers of all faiths wide latitude, consistent with laws binding on all citizens, to worship as they deem appropriate. A third factor flows from the political institutionalization of toleration which, by bringing people of different faiths and no faith at all together, encourages habits of heart and mind that reinforce the spirit of toleration. Putnam and Campbell call this “religious bridging,” or the common practice in contemporary America of spending time with people of different faiths or nonbelievers. “Multiple strands of evidence point in the same direction,” they argue. “When Americans associate with people of religions other than their own — or people with no religion at all — they become more accepting of other religions.” And this has served the interests of liberal democracy in America: “Interreligious mixing, mingling, and marrying have kept America’s religious melting pot from boiling over.”

Putnam and Campbell’s book is that all-too-uncommon achievement for practicing political scientists — a superb work of scholarship that engages, invigorates, and refines the public debate. Their ability to resist the typical bias against religion among social scientists and largely set aside partisan political predilections enables them to shed light on the ways in which religion is consistent with democracy in America and cultivates, to use a term they avoid, the virtues on which liberty depends.

At the same time, because they assume, in the spirit of Deweyan progressivism, that the more democratic a religion is the more it supports democracy, they overlook crucial dimensions of the relationship between religion, liberty, and democracy. In particular, they neglect religion’s role in providing a counterweight and corrective to democratic tendencies that impair democracy’s long-term interests. Tocqueville, for example, argued — based on acute observation of American society and politics, study of the fundamental character of democracy, and reflection on the intricacies of human nature — that the preservation of freedom depended in part on faith because religious belief fortified fixed moral principles

that democratic equality tended to attenuate or dissolve. This striking opinion is deeply rooted in the history of political philosophy, has significant implications for public policy, and is subject to empirical verification.

To carry forward the work of understanding religion in America to which Putnam and Campbell have made a major contribution, it would be necessary to expand the disciplines on which they draw to include political philosophy.

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