



An Interview with
Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell

Richard Madsen

Madsen: Your new book, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, is going to be an indispensable reference for anyone who wants to talk seriously about American religion in years to come. Would you summarize some of the main findings in the book, the things that really surprised you?

Putnam: Religion is, of course, a very big part of American life, and in many respects, the book shows that religion makes an important contribution to American democracy. But religion taken in high doses, as you can tell by just looking around the world, is often toxic to democratic comity, so we wanted to know whether and how Americans were able to combine three things that are not typically found together. Americans are religiously devout and religiously diverse but also religiously tolerant.

We found a very high level of tolerance and open-mindedness across religious lines. Americans overwhelmingly believe that people of other religions can go to heaven, and that doesn't mean just Methodists saying that a few Lutherans are going to make it into heaven. Large numbers, the majority even, of evangelical Protestants say that non-Christians can go to heaven if they're a good person.

If you looked at the headlines about culture wars, you'd think that most Americans were in one of two extreme categories: They believe there's very little or no truth in any religion—that amounts to about 6 percent or 7 percent of Americans. Or they believe that one religion is

true, namely theirs, and other religions are not true—that's only about 12 percent of Americans. The overwhelming majority of Americans are actually in the middle, saying there are basic truths in many religions. I was quite shocked that even very religious people say an American without religious faith can nevertheless be a good American. There's a lot of tolerance across various denominational lines and even across the line between being religious and not being religious. We tried to understand this by exploring the growth of interpersonal connections in families and among friends that cross religious lines, and I think we showed reasonable evidence that this is probably a causal relationship: that making friends with someone who is in a different faith tradition actually does encourage you to be more tolerant across religious lines.

I think both of us would want to emphasize, especially in this venue, that we build on a lot of work that has been done over the last several decades by a lot of other scholars, so to some extent, we are restating and providing new evidence in favor of some generalizations that other folks have made.

Campbell: We were surprised at the evidence we found both in our data and in other data, like the General Social Survey, that your politics can affect your religion. It can go in two directions. On the one hand, it can lead some folks to say, "well, I don't want to be a part of religion," because they don't like what they see as the influence of politics on religion. But it actually also

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goes the other way. We do find evidence that people who are themselves politically conservative over at least a short period of time become a little more religious. That accumulates year after year, and they become increasingly so and separate from those who are liberal and not religious.

Putnam: For a long time I couldn't believe that people were making choices about their religious behavior on the basis of their politics because I couldn't imagine that people would be making choices that might affect their eternal fate on the basis of how they felt about George W. Bush or Bill Clinton. Yet, our data show that people make choices either to attend church or not to attend church based in part on their political views. That's part of the larger story that we tell about how, over the last half century, one major earthquake—the 60s—was followed by two aftershocks—the rise of evangelical Protestantism in the 70s and 80s and then the rise of what we and others call the young “nones,” that is, young people who say they have no religious affiliation at all.

Campbell: When people's personal friendship networks become more religiously diverse, that seems to make them more accepting of other faiths, but it also turns out that if you add friends within a congregation, more church friends, you actually become more civically engaged.

People who are religious are more likely to be involved in their communities, they're more likely to be volunteers, and they're more likely to engage in philanthropic giving. They're actually more likely to give blood and behave in other ways that we might call simply being nice, but the explanation for exactly why that is the case has remained murky. One possibility is that it's the beliefs that religious people hold. They believe in the need to be like the Good Samaritan, or they believe that, if they do good things here on earth, they'll be rewarded in heaven. We actually thought that seemed quite plausible, so we

tested a variety of beliefs to try to explain the relationship between being religious and doing good things in your community. It turns out that beliefs are not the things that actually drive that relationship. Instead, it's your social networks, not simply having lots of friends, but whether or not you have a lot of friends in your religious congregation.

Madsen: Over fifty years ago, Will Herberg wrote the famous book, *Protestant Catholic Jew*. He described an America extremely religious and also extremely diverse, and he explained this as contributing to America's sense of solidarity, an affirmation of the American way of life, and of American democracy. Other scholars and historians say that around the middle of the twentieth century the kind of religiosity that Herberg talked about had reached a peak, that in the nineteenth century things like church going weren't as frequent as they came to be in the 1950s. What do your findings show has changed in the last fifty years, and, in terms of the sweep of American history, where would you place our present situation?

Campbell: One of the biggest differences is the growth of those who say they have no religion. What's striking about that group is that they're not necessarily secular. Obviously, there's some subset of those who say they have no religion who are atheist or agnostic, but, for the most part, these are people who are uncomfortable taking on the label of a particular religious group. They have not necessarily abandoned their fundamental religious beliefs—they believe in God, they believe in an afterlife, etc. I think this is a very different situation than what Herberg was observing in the middle part of the twentieth century where, as he describes it, everyone at that time would've been affiliated with some sort of religious group because that was an expression of your ethnicity.

Madsen: And, also, of Americanism.

Campbell: Yes, right, that's what it meant to be an American. The other observation I would make is, going forward, it's inevitable that the United States will become a more religiously diverse country because of immigration, but also because America is a very fluid religious environment, and that almost ineluctably leads to a greater diversity of religions.

Madsen: In your book, partly to my surprise, the diversity of religions in America wasn't such a big theme. The impression I got was that the number of believers in non-Christian religions—Islam, Buddhism, and so forth—was fairly low, and they don't seem to have a major role in the society.

Campbell: It's true that in terms of the U.S. population, groups like Muslims, for example, are still a relatively small percentage. But inevitably, looking forward over the next generation or two, groups that now are quite small will be larger. I don't think they'll be dominant on the American landscape, but they'll be larger. There's also growing diversity within religious traditions, for example, the Catholic Church is increasingly becoming a majority Latino organization, which will totally transform the single largest denomination in the United States.

Putnam: Let me mention a couple of other ways in which we differ from *Protestant Catholic Jew*. One important difference is the image of the triple melting pot. The image of religion that's described in that book as closely related to ethnicity and to ethnic heritage is a world in which religion is largely inherited. We're describing a world in which religion is much more likely to be chosen. So we find that upwards of a third of all Americans are now worshipping in a faith tradition other than the one that they were raised in, and if you count switches among mainline Protestant

or among evangelical Protestant branches, then it's higher than a third. That means that a large fraction of Americans have chosen their religion. Here our data are consistent with other studies, such as those of the Pew Research Center. This is actually a change in the world.

And contrary to the image that appeared in the best writings about religion in the 1950s, which was that America was a society in which we had three mutually tolerant but not connected faiths—Protestant, Catholic, and Jew—we find a sharp increase in intermarriage across those lines. Most new marriages now are interfaith marriages. This further dilutes the idea of hermetically sealed and inherited religious faiths. That is really a big difference from the 1950s to now.

A second point is that denominational borders have broken down. The more important explanatory difference, and certainly in politics, is in terms of degree of religiosity—what matters is not Protestant or Evangelical or Catholic or Jewish, but how religious someone is. Bob Wuthnow noticed that change underway several decades ago, and we're seeing it continue. One part of this that would not have fit in the older framework is the rise of so-called "Christian" churches that don't have denominational ties.

Finally, it certainly is true if you compare the 1950s and today that Americans on average are less religious. Frequency of prayer has not changed very much, but certainly church attendance has tended to go down. But what we show, and this is consistent with what other people have shown, is that this is not the European pattern of secularization, which is a very slow, gradual decline in church attendance, where every decade another percentage point or two falls off. It's rather, we think, linked to particular events in the society. That's what we referred to as the shock and two aftershocks, and we don't think that it's necessarily fated to continue. Actually, we imagine that there could be new developments in the kind of religious offerings that are available to young people. If the religious entrepreneurs come up with the

right attractive mix, which would be likely to be less closely tied to conservative politics, then you might see a halting, at least a slowing, or maybe even a reversal in religious disaffiliation among young people.

I think in all these ways we're observing a different world than the world of the 1950s.

Madsen: It certainly is a different world. Although, if you remember, Herberg actually made a big point that the ideology of at least some American religious groups was that people voluntarily choose their faith. So there is this theme of voluntarism throughout American history, even if in fact actual membership reflected ethnicity. However, today, my sense is that there is a lot of switching going on but people don't tend to switch that far away from where they started. Is this the case?

Putnam: Of course, there's a general tendency for people to choose to move to faiths that are closer to them rather than further away. But saying that and implying that this has always been true obscures the question of what counts as close or different. A generation ago, a person who moved from being a Pentecostal to being a Methodist or being an Episcopalian to being a Baptist would've been thought of as having made a big move. Now those kinds of moves between evangelical and mainline Protestants are more common, and similarly among Catholics. It would certainly have been a big jump a generation ago for someone to move from being a Catholic to being an Evangelical, or vice versa, but those moves are much more common now. So while it's true, as you say, that moves are more common within Christianity than between Christianity and Islam, for example, to say that might be to obscure what's really most striking about the trend, which is that religious groups that used to be thought of as quite different are now seen as less different.

Ghost Marketing

Medical journals routinely publish ghost-written articles. What happens is that pharmaceutical or medical device manufacturers hire third-party medical education or marketing companies to develop articles and then recruit prominent physicians or scientists to sign on as the authors. These "authors" may have very limited or no familiarity with the research and provide little input to the actual article. Affixing prominent names and institutions increases the likelihood of the article getting published and raises the credibility of the findings and conclusions, while hiding the role of the drug or device maker. Analyses of ghost-written articles shows them to both exaggerate effectiveness and downplay adverse effects. They are, in the words of one article, a form of "ghost marketing." As the drug company Wyeth once expressed it: "a scientific publication plan is as vital as a carefully designed media plan in overall product marketing."

Last June, the office of Senator Charles Grassley released a report, "Ghostwriting in Medical Literature," that explored this clandestine practice. The findings were not encouraging. While some top medical schools—and only some—prohibit ghostwriting, they do little to detect it. Since recruited "authors" are not typically paid to add their names, the relationship does not appear on financial disclosure forms and so often remains invisible to both universities and funding agencies. Similarly, leading medical journals have strengthened their authorship and financial disclosure policies but with apparently little effect on ghostwriting. And even when the "editorial assistance" of medical writers is acknowledged, "the role of pharmaceutical companies in medical publications remains veiled or undisclosed."

The report ends with a call for additional steps to increase transparency and accountability. We can only hope.

See the report at: <http://grassley.senate.gov/about/upload/Senator-Grassley-Report.pdf>.

Madsen: Let me ask about the rise of the “nones.” You said that in the 90s you see a steady increase in people who claim no religious affiliation, but yet they’re not necessarily atheists. They believe in God, and they want some kind of a spiritual life. How do you characterize this? Is this a little bit like the rise of Independents in the political sphere who are waiting to be captured by a new coalition? Do you think these “nones” will end up in some kind of church eventually, or do you think they’re going to live their lives as “nones”?

Putnam: It is in some respects like Independents. One of the things we’ve found—this is not so much highlighted in the book as it is in a forthcoming article in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*—is that because we’ve interviewed people twice, we can watch them moving in and out of religions, and by far the biggest movement that we detected is people moving in and out of the category of “none.” So although the total number of “nones” in our two waves of interviews was essentially identical, we can see that about a third of all people who said they were a “none” last time we talked with them now say they’re a “something,” and they’re matched by another group of people who were a “something” when we talked to them a year ago but now call themselves a “none.” We call these people “liminal nones” because they’re sort of betwixt and between. They’re partly in and partly out of a faith, and we show in this article that these “liminal nones” don’t change the rest of their behavior. They’re basically more or less constant in their frequency of going to church or their theological beliefs. They don’t report any particular conversion; it’s just that their religious identity is substantially weaker. So, when you catch them on a Tuesday or a Thursday, they’re thinking of themselves, “well, I guess I’m Catholic,” and then you catch them on a Monday or a Friday and they’re thinking,

“well, no, I guess I’m nothing.”

Around each of the major religious traditions, there appears to be a penumbra of people, about 10 percent of all the people, who, if you caught them when they were a “something,” would be in a religion, who are neither quite in nor quite out. That’s a large and important group. To follow your analogy to Independents: in the language of party identification, they’re leaners. That is, they’re kind of Independent, but they’re leaning toward, if anything, being a “something,” a Catholic, or a Baptist, or whatever. We suspect that a large part of the rise of the young “nones” is attributable to an increase in these liminal figures who are detached from a particular religious tradition, but not entirely.

I have to say, we don’t know for sure how the fraction of “liminal nones” has been changing. But, it’s an important fact to note that of the people who tell you in any given year that they’re “nones,” a large fraction of them when you talk to them next year will tell you that they’re a “something.”

Madsen: So, the “nones” are in a process of moving somewhere?

Putnam: We don’t know that they’re moving actually. It’s possible that some of these “liminal nones” are going to be stably liminal though they could also be transitional figures.

Madsen: If these “nones,” as you analyze them, were, at least in part, turned off by the politics of the faith tradition they were part of, and they lost their affiliation, why would they become “nones”? For instance, if one did not like the views on homosexuality and gay marriage preached in one’s conservative Evangelical church, why not just join a liberal Protestant church like the Episcopal church that ordains gay bishops? But such liberal churches seem to actually be declining. If people are fed up for various

reasons with politically conservative church traditions, they don't seem to go to a religious alternative, or do they?

Campbell: That's a good question, and we've actually discussed that amongst ourselves quite a bit. The scenario that you describe is certainly one possibility, that the "nones" just end up in mainline Protestant churches. Here are a couple of hypotheses as to why that hasn't been the case. One is, if what these folks are resistant to is not just conservative politics but actually politics in general at church, they may not find themselves terribly comfortable in a lot of mainline churches, because in another part of the book we show that there's actually more politics in liberal churches than in conservative churches, or at least politics coming over the pulpit. Another possibility is that the old mainline churches are actually not providing the sort of worship that these folks would find attractive, which we suggest would probably be an evangelical style of religion but without the politics. We describe one genre of that type of church in the book, the "emergent church" as it's sometimes called. I would speculate that the older mainline churches, just in terms of the actual worship experience that they provide, are not something that your average young person necessarily finds to their liking.

Putnam: I also think that the religious marketplace will respond to this rise of the young "nones," but we're still in the early days. It's important to keep in mind this has been happening fairly recently, less than twenty years, and I don't think the religious marketplace changes that rapidly.

The Episcopal church or the other churches that might appeal to this group, in marketing terms—these are brands that were forged in the fires of the Reformation five centuries ago. We don't say it's impossible for those churches to have a different flavor, but what it means to be an Episcopalian from the point of view of the average

Joe who's decided he doesn't want to attend his Evangelical church is not so much driven by the controversy about gay bishops as by the general cultural sense of what Episcopalianism is about. That could change, of course, over time, but it doesn't change instantly.

Madsen: So the mobility is partly constrained by identification with the particular brand, if you will.

Let me go on to some of the political implications. You write very insightfully about the creation of coalitions of conservative churches, or parts of churches, under the Republican Party, especially because of the issues of abortion and homosexuality. You argue that this coalition building doesn't just happen organically and that religion didn't have to be associated with one particular part of a political movement. If you were going to give advice to someone who was trying to build a new coalition, say, someone who wanted to do it for the Democrats, to build a coalition of a number of different religious groups and tie them to a particular kind of political tradition, how would you do that? What's the recipe for doing that successfully?

Campbell: Well, that's a tough question, but let me take a shot at it. Firstly, something would have to change among religious believers. It's important to note that the reason that the social issues—abortion and homosexual rights—work as a glue for the Religious Right is that religiosity is so strongly related to opinions on those two bundles of issues. That's why when politicians speak about those issues, they're able to assemble the coalition of the religious, as we describe them. The fact that religiosity is strongly related to opinions on those issues is not due to Karl Rove, and it wasn't even due to Jerry Falwell. That had long been the case. It's just that those issues hadn't been politically salient. So, religious

people were more conservative on sexual issues before the rise of the Religious Right, but that fact didn't have any sort of political relevance, whereas it does now.

One issue where there's been a lot of speculation that this could happen is the environment, although we actually don't see much evidence in our own data that Evangelicals are necessarily sympathetic to the environmental movement. Certainly there are some Evangelical leaders who are trying to make that case within the tradition, and it could be that a generation from now it will seem very natural to speak of conservative Protestants as being quite open to an environmental argument framed in religious terms. But in order to get from here to there, there would need to be a lot of changes in the way religious folks, particularly Evangelical folks, think about the environment.

Madsen: Let me ask questions that are almost theological, that go beyond social science a little bit. Herberg did that, of course, because he was a theologian as well as a social scientist. At the end of his book, he talked about this American style of religion, and he said it was essentially conformist to certain kinds of value groups in the U.S. People who were part of it were virtually incapable of understanding figures like Elijah or Amos or Isaiah or Jesus—the prophetic dimensions of that tradition. So in the end, he saw this kind of religion as relatively shallow. I wonder if American religiosity is shallow in theological terms, and if that's what gives us our capacity to have tolerance in the midst of diversity.

My nephew recently married a Muslim. He was a Catholic, and he converted to Islam. I asked his wife about being Muslim, and she said, "well, you know, I'm spiritual, not religious," which meant that she didn't follow the stricter aspects of Islamic law and so forth seriously. I think you see this hap-

pening all over, a watering down to some degree of the more prophetic aspects of these differences. Would you characterize this kind of religiosity in those terms?

Putnam: Well, let me agree in part but then also disagree fairly sharply with that diagnosis of American religion. I agree that there's a fair amount of ecumenicism in Americans' views about religion today and probably more today than there was even when Herberg was writing. That's really the gist of what we're saying about the fact that Americans are religiously devout and religiously diverse and nevertheless religiously tolerant, but I pretty strongly disagree that in the past or maybe even in the present there's no prophetic strain in American religion. I think if you look at the major episodes of egalitarian social change in America, beginning with the Revolution but then most especially in the white abolition movement of the mid-nineteenth century and then again in the civil rights movement, that's powerfully prophetic religion.

I'm not a theologian, but as a social scientist and as a historian, I'm actually very attracted to the prophetic role of religion because I think having a set of moral principles that stand apart from the mere facts of history is what enables someone to say of a social practice like slavery, for example, that it is morally wrong. Most white northern Americans in the first half of the nineteenth century were perfectly content to live with slavery. Probably the most important single factor that awoke white abolitionism in the North was the second Great Awakening, the evangelical movement that swept across the northern and central parts of the United States in the 1830s and 1840s. Similarly, there was a strong social gospel impetus behind the reforms of the Progressive Era, Women's Suffrage, and so on, and most important of all, Herberg was writing on the eve of probably the best example of prophetic religion in American history, namely the Civil Rights movement. Martin Luther King

was a prophet exactly in the sense of Isaiah.

I have a complicated personal religious history, but I was raised a Methodist, and was an active Methodist as a young person, and I remember very distinctly when, in the late 1950s in a small conservative town in a pretty conservative Methodist congregation, my minister said “racism is a sin.” Well, that’s powerful language. It’s prophetic language. It’s more than just saying segregation is wrong or inconvenient or something. It’s to say your personal faith is implicit in this system of organized segregation. That was coming immediately after Herberg wrote, so I think for those who try to write contemporary history, as David and I have done, it’s an important warning that prediction is hard. I agree that, maybe except for the issue of the right to life, there’s been a diminution of the prophetic voice

in America in recent years. There’s plenty to be outraged about, I think. The growth of inequality and class segregation in America is ripe for a religious prophecy that says “here I stand and I can do no other.” I think that’s an important element in religious history, including in American religious history.

Madsen: I basically agree with you on that, and Herberg would’ve certainly been very sympathetic to what you just said. But what he was saying back then was that the data didn’t show this prophetic element. What I was asking is, is it in your data?

Putnam: It is a subdued strain in our own data, but it wasn’t in the data in the 1950s, just a few years before it transformed America.



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Campbell: One element that I think is worth noting as well is that people do take their religious beliefs seriously, so it's not just that they have some amorphous mush of beliefs that don't vary much from one person to another. People do seem to have beliefs that matter to them personally. We find a fair amount of stability compared to public opinion questions on, say, political issues, and an amazingly high level of stability in terms of the beliefs that people have like faith over works and the strength of their belief in God and a variety of things like that. The sort of scenario Bob describes, that some leader in the future is able to capitalize on those beliefs and inspire a new generation to think about issues in a new way framed in religious terms, could very well happen. So, I'm resistant to say Americans don't really know what they believe and everybody's just sort of picking a local congregation on the basis of who has the

nicest place to play basketball or something. There's more to it than that.

Putnam: And I would want to say one last thing. There is a notion implicit in your question—although I don't mean to attribute this view to you, but I've heard it as I've talked to people around the country about our book—that a prophetic religion has to be intolerant of other religions. That is to say that the fact that we're tolerant of other religions implies that we have no strong moral beliefs. But, it seems to me that Martin Luther King is a standing refutation of that view. Martin Luther King was without a doubt a prophetic leader. That is, he called us to obligations that resonated deep in our own faiths regardless of what our views on segregation had previously been, and yet he was a very ecumenical leader. Without a doubt, he was ecumenical, so I think that the idea that you can't be deeply prophetically religious without being hostile to other faiths is a canard.

Madsen: I would certainly agree with that myself, although there are different kinds of things that would pass as prophecy, some exclusionary, but others, of course, like Martin Luther King, would be deeply inclusionary.

Putnam: Exactly. ■

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