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American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us (Book Review)

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Putnam, Robert, and David E. Campbell, with assistance from Shaylyn Romney Garrett. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010. 673 pages. ISBN 978-1-4165-6671-7 and 978-1-4165-6688-5 (e-book). Reviewed by Jack R. Van Der Slik, Professor of Political Studies and Public Affairs emeritus, University of Illinois, Springfield.

Putnam and Campbell have given us a “big book” that will be cited and commented on in a wide range of popular as well as sociopolitical literature. Large in size, putatively a groundbreaking work of political research, it has been written to be read not only by students and academics but by anyone who takes part in or takes offense at religious observance in America. Reviews of it appear not simply in academic media but in the *New York Times* and other widely circulated publications. The subject studied is religious behavior in America, with attention to how such behavior intersects with American politics. When common courtesy suggests that in polite conversation folks should avoid introducing their ideas of either religion or politics, one can anticipate views expressed here that will offend sensitivities about both realms.

The authors take into account a vast array of data, reaching back to behavior in the 1950s and since (footnotes fill pages 571-647). However, most of the analysis especially scrutinizes Faith Matters surveys, the main one conducted in 2006 (3108 respondents) and a follow-up in 2007 (1909 respondents). The authors compare their results to the General Social Survey, 2006, and various Gallup polls. To keep the analysis understandable, data are presented graphically and in percentages, with statistical controls and methodological details mercifully reported in the appendix and the notes. One of the helpful measures that the authors use is a religiosity index. It combines survey responses from individuals regarding six questions (attendance, frequency in prayer, religion in daily life, how religion affects “who you are,” strength of belief in “your religion,” strength of belief in God), seeking to override parochialism by using the relevant responses common among “all religious traditions.” With this index the authors distinguish five quintiles (20 percent of respondents in each) of religious intensity from least to most. By using this measure, the authors can cross-classify religious intensity with other variables of interest.

Another tool of analysis is the authors’ taxonomy of American religious practice. Protestants are distinguished into three types—Evangelical Protestants (30 percent of the population), Black Protestants (8 percent), and

Mainline Protestants (14 percent). And then there are Catholics (24 percent) and “Nones,” people who report no religious affiliation (17 percent). Jews (2 percent), Mormons (2 percent) and “Other faiths,” such as Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs and others (3 percent) comprise the remainder. Except at specific points, most of the analysis uses the five largest categories of religious affiliation.

In a surprising move, the authors enrich their account with reportorial vignettes that describe in surprising detail contemporary portraits of a cross-section of individual church congregations. *Pro Rege* readers who are faithful to their own congregations and denominations will find it enlightening to read close-ups about the habits, outlooks, and practices of worshipers in eight congregations (about 15 pages in each) such as Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Druid Heights near Baltimore, Maryland; St. Pius V Catholic Church in the Lower West Side, Chicago, Illinois; and Living Word Christian Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The readers of *American Grace* will find a number of unsurprising points in the reported findings. The United States exceeds most of the industrialized nations of the world in religious observance. Thirty-eight percent of Americans report being active members of a church or religious organization. More women are actively involved in churches than men. The greatest recent decline in religious participation has occurred in Mainline Protestant churches. Substantial political activity within congregations takes place in Black Protestant churches.

Perhaps less expected, even surprising, are the following: African Americans are far more religious than whites, even when compared to white evangelicals. More of them attend church weekly, more report that religion is important to their daily lives, more report that religion bears upon their important decisions and that religion is an important part of their identity (275-76). Against a backdrop of changing roles for women in the United States since the 1960s and a common preference among Christians for women to run their homes and leave the breadwinning to men, both religious and secular women entered the workforce “at about the same rate” (237). Participation in the world of work rose for both highly

religious women and highly secular ones—for the religious, 40 percent in 1973 to 56 percent in 2008; for the secular, 41 percent in 1973 to 60 percent in 2008. In short, religious tenets and religious institutions did not deter religious women from economic enterprise. Moreover, there is a growing consensus among both men and women favoring a bigger role for women in their churches.

Within the widening gap between haves and have-nots in America, religiosity is correlated with greater class bridging. The fact is that more religiously observant Americans have friendships and social interactions with people on welfare or those doing manual work than do their secular counterparts. Moreover, this is especially true among Evangelical Protestants, whose fellow church members are diverse in employment and highly social in their behavior.

Religiosity is highly correlated with good neighborliness. The more religious not only volunteer more for religious causes, they more commonly volunteer for secular causes than do their secular counterparts. Similarly, “Regular churchgoers are more likely to give to secular causes than non-churchgoers, and highly religious people give a larger fraction of their income to secular causes than do most secular people” (448).

What is the explanation for partisan polarization along religious lines? To summarize the analysis and argument, Putnam and Campbell identify distinct eras and the popular shifts that occurred in them regarding the relationship of religion and politics. In the 1950s, an era when church attendance was at its zenith in American life, religious and political cleavages were cross cutting and not correlated. There were religious liberals and conservatives among both Republicans and Democrats. There was little correspondence between religious identities and partisan identities when the candidates were Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson.

From the mid-1960s into the early 1970s the themes of sex, drugs, rock and roll, anti-Vietnam activism, women’s liberation, “God is dead,” and the like, marked the unleashing of a libertine social culture. There was a substantial decline in popular confidence regarding, among other things, Christian religious institutions. A drastic demoralization occurred particularly among Mainline Protestant leaders and members. American Catholics were struggling with the meaning and consequences of Vatican II. In fact, “The fraction of all Americans who said that religion was ‘very important’ to

them personally fell from 75 percent percent in 1952 to 52 percent in 1978” (97-98). That percentage decline was even sharper among young adults.

The first aftershock emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. In both religious and political perspectives many Americans were morally concerned about the changes in this society. The concern was particularly evident among Evangelical Protestants, whose church memberships grew especially at the expense of Mainline Protestant churches. Increasingly, those Americans high on religiosity reflected conservative views about a politicized social agenda. The most persistent single issue was the right to life versus abortion by choice. Increasingly, the political players sorted themselves out in terms of the appeal of this and related issues, Democrats increasingly as cultural liberals and Republicans increasingly as cultural conservatives. Partisan politics took on the hue of culture wars. Republican politicians claimed the conservative social agenda that conservative religious leaders advocated regarding public policy and personal morality.

In the second aftershock, registered during the 1990s and after, particularly among a new generation of young Americans, survey data revealed that young adults viewed religion, and particularly the Religious Right, “as judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical, and too political” (121). There was a notable increase in the number of those who claimed to have no religious affiliation, those the authors call “Nones.” It is especially among them that there has been a backlash against the Religious Right.

What has kept Americans from being at one another’s throats despite the fact that in the last 35 years the combination of religious and political conservatism has been battling against the social policies of the religious and political liberals? It is essentially that the numbers of intense religious and political partisans on either the left or the right are relatively few. Moreover their disagreements do not lead to total rejections of one another—either in religious or political terms. In the matter of religious affiliation, “most Americans are intimately acquainted with people of other faiths” (523). Indeed, 84 percent of Americans, an overwhelming majority, believe that religious diversity has been good for America. Most Americans welcome the influence of religion and “an overwhelming majority of Americans (92 percent) say that the construction of a large Christian church in their community would either not bother them (55 percent) or is something they would welcome (37

percent)” (513). The authors find that with substantial consistency, people acknowledge the legitimacy of one another’s beliefs, thereby building bridges of mutual acceptance. As a result, “Interreligious mixing, mingling, and marrying have kept America’s religious melting pot from boiling over” (548).

It is evident that religion has greatly affected politics in our time and doubtless will continue to do so. But the authors cannot say how. The two related issues, abortion and homosexuality, have had polarizing effects both religiously and politically. Yet, both are declining in polarity and each in its own way. There is a growing consensus, including among young people, that an abortion “right” is not absolute and ought not to be broad, that regulation and limits are acceptable, and that abortion should be discouraged but not banned (406–414). Meanwhile, homosexual lifestyles are less and less controversial to the young, and civil unions, even marriages within that group, are increasingly acceptable. If these issues provide declining political traction to either political party in the future, the distinctive partisan impact of the “Religious Right” upon elections is likely to decline.

While it is not the authors’ purpose to give direction to Evangelicals, we can derive a sense in which America’s shifting political tectonics may be a good thing for the Christian message. The liberalizing trend in society toward acceptance of homosexuality will erode its potency as partisan issue. (Some will recall with me when divorce could sink a political candidate.) Legal permission for abortion has narrowed. If bright-line restrictions in such matters are no longer winning issues for Republican partisans, the change will loosen the ties between Evangelicals and the Republican

political party. Meanwhile the contemporary Nones, though unconnected to churches, “do not seem to have discarded all religious beliefs and predilections.” They are not “atheists” or “agnostics.” Only five individuals out of 3108 survey respondents applied those terms to themselves. To the contrary, 47 percent of the Nones affirmed that they were “absolutely sure of God’s existence” (104). They are “spiritual, not religious.... They reject conventional religious affiliations, while not entirely giving up of their religious feelings” (126). These observations testify about a field white for harvest. Turned off by the political dogmatism of the Christian Right, as the issues that mobilize that Right fade, the message of God’s love for all sinners will engage many of the Nones. The Evangelical church has a message about forgiveness and salvation in Christ. The inclusiveness of that message has been obscured by conspicuous political voices that benefitted from agitating and mobilizing the “Christian Right.”

Putnam and Campbell have not given us a how-to book for Christian Evangelicals to carry out the Great Commission. It is a cool, dispassionate, and broadly gauged analysis about the intersection of political and religious attitudes and practices in contemporary American life. However, it does uncover how diligently practicing Christians can become cats’ paws for hard-eyed political practitioners keen to sloganeer their way into political office opportunities. Nevertheless, the high task of kingdom building continues to challenge our Reformed community to articulate and promote God-given norms for the America of our day. Certainly the political arena offers a worthy calling for our best talents and creativity.

Walker, Rob. *Buying In— The Secret Dialogue Between What We Buy and Who We Are*. New York: Random House, 2008. 261 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4000-6391-8. Reviewed by Dale Zevenbergen, Instructor of Business Administration and Special Gifts Officer at Dordt College.

Why do we buy what we buy? Why are branding and advertising efforts so effective when most of us say we’re not affected by them? Are consumers today really in control as is commonly bemoaned by marketing experts? The answers to these questions (and many more) are addressed in *Buying In*. Rob Walker has been observing American consumer culture for years and writing about it in columns in *Slate*, *Fortune*, *GQ*, and others. He currently writes a column for the *New York Times Magazine* called “Consumed.” Rob’s column and his websites [www.](http://www.marketing.com)

marketing.com and www.robwalker.net, as well as *Buying In*, have been very helpful resources for me as I explore the world of marketing and advertising with students here at Dordt College.

The audience for Walker’s column, blogs, and book appear to be anyone interested in modern marketing and consumer behavior—from marketing professionals and entrepreneurs to students and teachers of marketing, and really to anyone interested in ethical issues surrounding marketing and consumption. Introducing