

# RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE

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As a sociologist and a Catholic activist, I was anxious to read *American Grace* by Harvard's Robert D. Putnam and Notre Dame's David E. Campbell. I was not disappointed: it is the most impressive volume on religion and public life to be published in many years. The subtitle of the book, *How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, accurately conveys the theme.

The findings are culled from large-scale surveys, the results of which have been compared to the findings of other prominent surveys; there is also some anecdotal material, drawn from congregational profiles, that bring the data to life. After reviewing the religious landscape over the past half century, the authors write, "Perhaps the most noticeable shift is how Americans have become polarized along religious lines." By that they do not mean that people of different faiths find themselves at odds more than ever; rather, they are speaking to the religious-secular divide. Every day I go to work I find plenty of evidence they are right.

American society has witnessed several periods of religious change, beginning in the 1960s. Unlike the Fifties, a decade where religious participation was at its highest point, the Sixties was a period of secular revolt. Indeed, it was a time of cultural convulsions: challenges to traditional interpretations of morality were commonplace, often crudely expressed. This triggered a backlash which was made evident with the rise of religious conservatism, reaching a peak under the presidency of Ronald Reagan. More recently, we have seen a secular surge. The culture war, it seems plain, is up for grabs.

It has long been true that young people tend to drift away from religion (at least until they marry and have families), but today's young people tend to be more secular-minded than previous generations, owing in part to their more secular-minded boomer parents. They are decidedly more friendly to gay rights, although they are less committed to the abortion-rights movement than previous generations. Overall, Americans today are much less likely to say that religion is "very important" to them than was true of men and women in the Fifties; church attendance is down, as well.

Much has been said lately about the “nones,” i.e., those who claim they have no religious affiliation. Here is where Putnam and Campbell are at their best. The “nones” constitute about 17 percent of the population, making them larger than mainline Protestants (14 percent). But unlike those energetic atheists whom I debate, these “nones” really have no cause for celebration: “most of the nones are not necessarily hard-core secularists,” they say, and, in fact, “self-identified atheists and agnostics comprise a vanishingly small proportion of the U.S. population.”

So who are these “nones” if not the unbelievers? For the most part, they are people who still believe in God, but for a whole host of reasons do not choose to affiliate with any organized religion. That this has something to do with the cultural preoccupation with radical autonomy seems plain, but, no matter, it is not a good sign for those of us who hold to traditional beliefs. On the other hand, while this group is fertile pickings for militant secularists, the fact that most of them are not swelling the ranks of the Secular Humanist Society cannot be overlooked.

Many of the findings in this book find support with previous studies. Women are more religious than men; the poor gravitate to religion more than the wealthy; blacks take their religion more seriously than whites; Latinos are now prominently represented among the ranks of the faithful; Americans across the board are more liberal on the question of pre-marital sex than ever before; and support for abortion and homosexuality split cleanly on the religious-secular divide. This religious chasm is also manifested politically as Republicans are more religious friendly, and the Democrats more secular friendly.

This is an accurate profile of Americans, both past and present. A more contentious issue is the public role of religious Americans and their secular counterparts.

The data drive the authors to maintain that “religious Americans are, in fact, more generous neighbors and more conscientious citizens than their secular counterparts.” Yes, religious men and women volunteer more often, giving more of their time tending to youth, the elderly and the needy than secularists, and this includes time spent volunteering in secular institutions, not just religious ones. They are also more generous: nearly a third of the most secular 20 percent

of the population give nothing to charity, while only 6 percent of the most religious 20 percent are this stingy.

When it comes to measuring empathy and altruism, we learn that religious Americans "score significantly higher" than their secular brethren. They are also more participatory: people of faith are much more likely to join community organizations, and "even professional and labor groups." The evidence suggests, say the social scientists, that "religiously observant Americans are more civic and in some respects simply 'nicer.'" Indeed, they find that those who are religious are also happier than others. The work by Arthur C. Brooks, now the president of the American Enterprise Institute, found much the same in all categories.

The authors take issue with Brooks, however, by questioning his contention that religious conservatives are more generous than other Americans. They say it is the religious status, not the ideological one, that explains this phenomenon. In fairness to Brooks, however, he found that "liberal families earn on average 6 percent more per year than conservative families, and conservative families [give] more than liberal families within every income class, from poor to middle class to rich." Similarly, Republicans give more than Democrats.

If there is one finding I would quarrel with it is the conclusion that secular Americans are more tolerant than religious Americans. Putnam and Campbell correctly contend that most survey data point to this conclusion, but the problem is most of the studies share the same methodological bias.

In 1991, I published an article in a popular magazine assessing the history of tolerance surveys. Beginning with the work of Samuel A. Stouffer in the 1950s, it is true that most surveys show that religious Americans are less tolerant. In general, the most tolerant Americans are purported to be well-educated, liberal, young, urbanite and male; they are also more likely to live in the northern states and have no religious affiliation. But are they really more tolerant, or just more indifferent?

Tolerance means "to put up with"; indifference means it doesn't matter. The former may be a virtue, though tolerance for intolerance is hardly meritorious. Indifference, on the other hand, bears no respect as a civic virtue. Only one study

that I encountered picked up on this difference, and that was the work of John L. Sullivan, James Piereson and George E. Marcus, *Political Tolerance and American Democracy*.

Sullivan et al. understand that real tolerance exists only when there is a conflict with other values. For example, the problem with most tolerance studies is that they rarely pose questions that challenge verities held by those who are more liberal and secular in their outlook. For example, it stands to reason that those who treasure a core set of traditional moral values will be less sympathetic to the rights of those who seek to mock them than secularists would be. We just saw this played out with the reaction of secularists to the ants-on-the-crucifix video at the Smithsonian: when we complained of their intolerance, we were labeled censors, or worse.

In the 1980s, Herbert McClosky and Alida Brill reviewed tolerance surveys from the late 1970s. In *Dimensions of Tolerance*, they scored as intolerant those who said marital infidelity was wrong. The implication, of course, is that society would profit by having more Americans demonstrating tolerance for adultery. In fact, they have, and the social consequences are just as evident.

A free society depends on a moral consensus: if there isn't general agreement on what constitutes right and wrong, then it is a sure bet that government will establish the moral ordinates. Therefore, while social norms that are tightly drawn may be inimical to freedom, constant attempts to make them more elastic are fraught with danger. That this should be done under the banner of tolerance make the results all the more pernicious.

On p. 1 of *American Grace*, the authors say that when the Cecil B. DeMille classic, "The Ten Commandments," came out in the 1950s, monuments of the Ten Commandments were donated to communities across the country by De Mille and the Fraternal Order of Eagles. No one blinked. They correctly observe that if such an undertaking were to take place today, it would be "the subject of litigation all the way to the Supreme Court." So true and so revealing.

This anecdote speaks volumes. Despite what the pundits have said, there is very little evidence that over the past half century traditionalists have sought to turn America into a theocracy. But there is plenty of evidence showing how civil

libertarians, multiculturalists and organized atheists have sought to drive religious expression from the public square. Their intolerance is palpable.

The same is true in the schools: textbooks have been stripped of their religious content and gross intolerance has been shown to our Judeo-Christian heritage. At the level of higher education, just last year a professor from the University of Illinois was fired (he was later reinstated) for the crime of explaining in an e-mail to an inquiring student what the natural law teaching of the Catholic Church is on homosexuality. "On America's elite campuses, today," writes Yale professor Stephen Carter, "it is perfectly acceptable for professors to use their classrooms to attack religion, to mock it, to trivialize it, and to refer to those whom faith truly matters as dupes, and dangerous on top of it." I have said it before and I will say it again: there is more tolerance for dissent within the Church than exists on college campuses.

Yes, there are militant religious fundamentalists who are just as intolerant, but the difference is that tolerance surveys are not likely to tap the intolerance of militant secular fundamentalists. There is a secular and political hue to these surveys that reflects the ideological predilections of those who devise them.

Aside from this reservation, *American Grace* is a book that is rich with information and analysis on the status of religion and public life in America. The authors have given us a book that is as readable as it is erudite.