

6-2011

## Review of American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us, by Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell

Dennis Hodgson  
Fairfield University, hodgson@fairfield.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/sociologyandanthropology-facultypubs>

Archived with permission from the copyright holder.

Copyright 2011 Wiley and Population Council.

Link to the journal homepage: (<http://wileyonlinelibrary.com/journal/padr>)

---

### Repository Citation

Hodgson, Dennis, "Review of American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us, by Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell" (2011). *Sociology & Anthropology Faculty Publications*. 28.  
<https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/sociologyandanthropology-facultypubs/28>

### Published Citation

Hodgson, Dennis. Review of American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us, by Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell. *Population and Development Review* 37, no. 2 (June 2011): 399-401.

This item has been accepted for inclusion in DigitalCommons@Fairfield by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It is brought to you by DigitalCommons@Fairfield with permission from the rights-holder(s) and is protected by copyright and/or related rights. **You are free to use this item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses, you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.** For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@fairfield.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@fairfield.edu).

of things you know well, and addresses all of the latest research even outside of your sub-field in an engaging yet correct way.

But to write a commercial press tradebook—the kind of book your in-laws, who are mildly curious about what you do for a living, might actually read—you need to write it with *no* tables and *no* charts. This is a difficult challenge for an author. If you want to discuss declining fertility, certainly a simple graph of fertility over time is OK? But no graphs are allowed. Want to discuss differences in the level of education, certainly a bar chart is OK? No charts. These constraints often mean that “best sellers” about development get written by amateurs (writers who might be professional authors but not development experts), advocates with a self-serving agenda to push, or both (e.g., Mortenson and Relin’s *Three Cups of Tea*).

So I feel we all owe Charles Kenny. He has written an excellent, factually informed, and sophisticated account of the changes in income and quality of life in development over recent decades in a fully engaging way. If you need to recommend one book that conveys the general state of play in development to your in-laws or to undergraduates or to people at cocktail parties, I would recommend this book. Kenny is afraid of neither failure—he documents how hard the “economic growth” problem has been; nor success—he documents the massive progress in health, education, nutrition, and population. With *Getting Better* the literature on development is getting better.

*Kennedy School of Government  
Harvard University*

LANT PRITCHETT

**ROBERT D. PUTNAM AND DAVID E. CAMPBELL**  
*American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*  
New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010. 673 p. \$30.00.

Students of population generally are interested in religion for three reasons: as a source of influence on individuals’ demographic behavior, from union formation to reproduction; as an institutional actor that attempts to shape public policy in ways that affect demographic behavior, from the kind of sex education offered in schools to the availability of abortion; and as a “population unit” that has a retention rate, an attraction rate, and a growth rate. Putnam and Campbell, two political scientists from Harvard and Notre Dame respectively, address these three dimensions of religion in *American Grace*. The reader will find this wide-ranging and accessible account of religion’s place in American society full of insights with demographic import.

Many of the authors’ findings come from a “Faith Matters” panel survey. In the summer of 2006 a representative sample of 3,108 Americans were interviewed, 62 percent of whom were reinterviewed nine months later. The authors also analyzed half a century of survey data on American religious attitudes and behaviors. Carefully distinguishing between life-cycle change, generational change, and period-effect change, they use survey results to describe what has happened to religion in America over the last 50 years, focusing on its changing relationship with politics. Their goal

is to answer the subtitle's question: How does religion divide and unite Americans? Shaylyn Romney Garrett, whose assistance is acknowledged on the title page of the book, provides three chapters of descriptive "vignettes" of 11 congregations, including Saddleback Church in California, a mega-church with 22,000 weekly attendees, and Beth Emet, a liberal synagogue in Chicago. These vignettes give the reader a welcome reprieve from scrutinizing charts and graphs and add depth to the schema of "religious traditions" employed in this book (p. 17): Evangelical Protestants (30% of the population), Catholics (24%), "Nones" (17%), Mainline Protestants (14%), Black Protestants (8%), Other Faiths (3%), Jewish (2%), and Mormon (2%). The vignettes' vivid descriptions ably illustrate the very different ways individual Americans experience "religion."

The authors' story of religious change is of one a big "earthquake" followed by two "aftershocks." The earthquake was the coming of age of the baby boom generation. The emergence of the "sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll" counterculture shook the religious establishment to its core (p. 92). Eighty percent of boomers emerged from adolescence seeing little wrong with premarital sex, and by 1970 three-quarters of Americans deemed religion to be in decline. The first aftershock was the rise of religious conservatism. Mainline Protestant denominations, then the religious home of 28 percent of the population, began to lose congregants while Evangelical denominations increased their share. As important, the gap between Evangelicals and other Americans with respect to attitudes toward premarital sex, homosexuality, abortion, and school prayer began to grow. By the early 1990s the numbers and influence of Evangelicals peaked, and the rumblings of a second aftershock could be heard: discontent with "the growing public presence of conservative Christians" (p. 120). Young Americans began viewing religion as "judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical, and too political" (p. 121). The fraction of Americans who identified their religious affiliation as "none" began its increase from 7 percent in 1991 to today's 17 percent. This change is largely generational as just 5–7 percent of pre-boomers are "Nones," compared to 10–15 percent of boomers and 20–30 percent of post-boomers.

Putnam and Campbell contend that these two aftershocks have polarized Americans along religious and political lines. The highly religious confront the overtly secular in public struggles over abortion and homosexuality. The Republican Party molds its platform to attract social conservatives, while the Democratic Party, with pro-choice and gay-friendly positions, provides secular Americans a home. If you know how religious an individual is, you now have a good chance of correctly guessing his or her political party affiliation: the bottom quintile of the authors' religiosity scale is 68 percent Democratic and 23 percent Republican; the top quintile is 58 percent Republican and 32 percent Democratic (p. 372). Not only are the highly religious and overtly secular at opposite political poles, they see each other as intolerant of other lifestyles (p. 499). With such an alignment of religion and politics, one might think that America is likely to fracture along religious lines.

Putnam and Campbell, however, believe that the population dynamics of American religious traditions make any such fracture unlikely. For instance, the "Faith Matters" survey shows that over 60 percent of Mainline Protestants and Catholics have either left the faith of their parents or rarely attend religious services (p. 138), and about half of married Americans have spouses who grew up in a religious tradi-

tion different from theirs (p. 148). With so much “Switching, Matching, and Mixing” (Chapter 5), most Americans have ended up with a personal network of family and friends of varied religious traditions. This has bred religious tolerance. When asked whether people not of their faith, including non-Christians, can go to heaven, a majority of Americans of all religious traditions respond affirmatively—often simply disregarding their religions’ doctrines (pp. 534–540). A “web of interlocking personal relationships among people of many different faiths” fosters the coexistence of religious diversity and personal devotion. The authors call this “America’s grace” (p. 550).

With this strong story line the authors have shaped a mountain of survey data into an insightful account of the changing interaction of religion and politics. My one worry is that a story so heavily dependent on surveys of individual attitudes and behaviors might be only a partial one. The authors’ “religious traditions” rarely get examined as political actors. One vignette mentions that the First Presidency of the Church, the Mormon faith’s highest governing body, urged California Mormons to work for passage of Proposition 8 to end same-sex marriage (p. 365), but no accounts are offered of the past or present political activities of such religiously inspired actors as the Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition, the National Right to Life Committee, Focus on the Family, or even the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, which recently so visibly lobbied Congress and the White House to ensure that the 2010 health care reform bill would further restrict access to abortion. Although obviously relevant, such organizational accounts do not find an easy place in this survey-driven story of the interaction of religion and politics.

*Fairfield University*  
*Connecticut*

DENNIS HODGSON