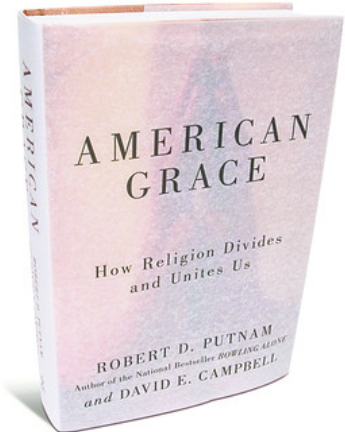


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By WILFRED M. MCCLAY

After a seemingly endless procession of tendentious and hotly argued books espousing "the new atheism" and blaming religion for all that is wrong with the world, "American Grace" comes as a welcome balm, offering a reasoned discussion of religion and public life. Rather than wrangle over matters of theology and science, Robert Putnam and David Campbell focus on extensive survey data to explore the kinds of conduct and attitudes that religious beliefs produce in individuals and groups. The authors ask to be regarded as neutral observers, not partisans. And their criteria for the success or failure of religion are almost entirely sociological and behavioral: By their fruits ye shall know them.

This approach will of course not appeal to everyone. But the result is a book that takes a mostly positive view of American religion, capturing its energy and variety. Chapters of historical or sociological interpretation alternate with "vignettes," artfully done portraits of particular church communities; the vignettes attempt to flesh out the other chapters' more abstract points. In the process, some important elements in the conventional wisdom receive a rude jolt.



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American Grace

By Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell
Simon & Schuster, 673 pages, \$30

Perhaps the best and most interesting chapter in this respect is "Religion and Good Neighborliness," which convincingly argues that, contrary to the stock depiction in popular culture, religious Americans make better neighbors by almost every index. They are more generous, with both their time and money; more civically active, in community organizations and political reform; more trusting; more trustworthy; and even measurably happier. The only exception to this list of positive traits: religious people tend to be less tolerant of views that clash with their own. These results hold even when the authors control for such factors as gender, education, income, race, region and age.

But it is indicative of a bias in the book, in favor of easygoing, temperate, smoothly functioning, non- threatening, non-boat-rocking religion, whose health is judged only by external and measurable factors. American religion is found praiseworthy by the authors chiefly for its too often underrated moderation, its appreciation of diversity and its good "social" effects. Much of "American Grace" attempts to provide support for that view. The religious category that the authors label, with ill - concealed disparagement, as "true believers" is small and diminishing—and a darn good thing, it would seem.

In this way, Messrs. Putnam and Campbell, while cutting against the conventional wisdom about religion's divisiveness, devalue the very thing they are trying to defend. They reprise the view lambasted by Will Herberg, more than a half-century ago, in his searing critique of American religious flaccidity, "Protestant Catholic Jew." Surely there is something ironic about preferring a form of religion that asks us to admire and study the great prophets and preachers while warning us against imitating them and their true-believing faith.

There is, moreover, a diffuseness in the argument of "American Grace" that is reflected in its subtitle: "How Religion Divides and Unites Us." Which is it? At the book's beginning, the authors assert flatly that "Americans have become polarized along religious lines." But by the closing pages, it appears that we are "not so divided after all," and "America's grace" overcomes religion's divisions. How can both of these things be true?

One answer, though the authors themselves do not endorse it, is to separate religion itself from the legal and institutional quarrels that vex American life. Messrs. Putnam and Campbell write as if the polarization of Americans about religious issues was driven by the choices and elective affinities of individuals reacting to the social upheaval of the 1960s and its continuing effects. In matters of sexuality, for example, which they rightly see as having an essential relationship to any serious religious commitment, they offer a surprisingly crude formulation that reflects the

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authors' rather coercive brand of moderation: The polarization of the past five decades on sexual matters has come about because "libertines and prudes have successively provoked one another." If only the sensible, nonextremist folks had been able to prevail, everything would have been much neater and nicer.

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This misses something important. Not until very deep in the book is the Supreme Court's still-controversial 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, making abortion on demand into a constitutional right, even mentioned. And when it is mentioned, there is no discussion of the ways in which this act by the federal government served to nationalize the abortion controversy, turning it into a "winner takes all" issue and bitterly dividing the nation in a way that did not need to happen. The Supreme Court has only worsened the problem in the years since by issuing a virtual gag order regarding the highly questionable decision, ensuring that the conflict will never end. This is not the fault of individual libertines and prudes. The country may be on the verge of seeing the courts do the same thing, equally disastrously, with the complex and delicate question of gay marriage.

For all the authors' talk about America's grace stemming from "interlocking relationships among people of many different faiths," at least they themselves have the grace, on the book's final page, to "acknowledge the important role of the nation's constitutional infrastructure." Somehow the Framers knew that guaranteeing freedom of religion would have a salutary effect on the republic that no amount of numbers-crunching and data-mining will ever quantify. [[Their insight and achievement is the ultimate source of American grace.]]

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