



American Grace: The Theological Price

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Abstract

The study, *American Grace* by Putnam and Campbell affirms the sociological significance of religion as a distinctive vitalising form of social capital. With its stress on virtues of trust, altruism and communal affiliation realised through social networking in congregations, this civil religion, one peculiar to the U.S.A., accomplishes a form of grace that resolves the puzzle of belief and pluralism by generating harmony and religious tolerance. This solution bears a price of rendering religion as end in itself, one detached from exclusivist theological claims in regard to salvation. In exposing this conundrum, the study reveals a highly significant and unexpected facet of the secularisation thesis.

Keywords

Religion, Social networks, Capital, Secularisation, Heaven

Amongst the elements affirmed in the special relationship between the U.K. and the U.S.A. covering democracy, equality and the culture of rights is one odd omission: religion. The two countries offer stark if not mystifying contrasts in their treatment of religion. Whereas in the U.S.A. there is a strict constitutional separation of state and religion, in the U.K. both are fused in law and symbolically in the monarchy and in the Established Church. Yet this comparison is misleading in practice. In the U.S.A., following a long lineage back to Lincoln and before, politicians, such as Clinton, Kennedy and Obama have had no hesitations about injecting invocations of God into their political rhetoric in ways that would be inconceivable in the U.K. where such presumptuous appeals to the Divine would be deemed as tasteless in the extreme. In short, in the U.S.A. God is felt in the pulse of the nation; in the U.K. such checks are unwarrantable.

These differences draw out the longstanding view of the peculiarity of religion in America which many commentators from Franklin, de Tocqueville to Weber have noted. Bellah's famous notion of civil

religion expresses the distinctiveness well. The concept denotes the invocation of God as ordaining and legitimising the sense of destiny of a chosen people, their individualism, their sturdy character, their democratic values and prophetic stances. Embodying Protestant values, not quite secularised and more like an implicit religion, these properties underline American exceptionalism in regard to theories of secularisation. *American Grace* throws much light on these issues.¹ Although about the vitality of American religion, the study is a chronicle of its long decline, one in which also ‘the moderate religious middle is shrinking’ (p. 3).

American Grace is the distinguished heir to other notable studies of religion in the U.S.A. such as those by Herberg and Lenski. Even though the disciplinary affiliations of Putnam and Campbell are in Political Science, this work fits in well with the broad church of the sociology of religion. Both authors have unusual religious pedigrees, Putnam being a convert from Methodism to Judaism and Campbell being a Mormon (p. 36). For those with a serious interest in American politics, culture and religion this study is indispensable. Handsome, well laid out, user friendly and written in a highly accessible style, rich with analytical subtleties, the study is replete with insights, far too many to be captured in a review. Technical statistical matters are kept in appendices. The data comes from two Faith Matters surveys and subsequent panel discussions with some of the sample whose overall size gives the study a high degree of validity. It is a matter of regret that a study on a similar scale in the U.K. would be inconceivable.

The study builds on Putnam’s first and highly notable work, *Bowling Alone*. It was concerned with the dwindling of social capital and networks. In that study, religion was treated as a crucial means of civic revival and replenishment of social capital. *American Grace* pursues this theme and exhibits brilliantly the networking powers and voluntarism of American religion. The concerns of this vast study are with religiosity in America in historical and contemporary terms; conversion and innovations in religion; gender, issues of homosexuality and abortion; ethnicity and politics in relation to government but also within congregations; voluntarism, community action, civic values and ‘good neighborliness’; and attitudes to religious diversity. In the last chapter 15, which examines ‘how a tolerant nation bridges its religious divide’, the prime example of America’s grace presented involves an intertwining of civil religion and the afterlife. This chapter reveals in American religion, the primacy of belonging

¹ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010). Page references in brackets are to the study.

over believing in ways that give unexpected comforts to advocates of the secularisation thesis.

Even though a wealth of themes can be found in the study, three stand out at beginning. The first relates to a question, or rather puzzle which Putnam and Campbell pose: *'how can religious pluralism coexist with religious polarization?'* (p. 4). They suggest the answer lies in the fluidity of American religion, which seems to operate in a marketplace of belief where shoppers move about without much worry over creedal exclusiveness. These movements with theological impunity relate to a point which Putnam and Campbell capture well that 'for many Americans, religion serves as a sort of civic glue, uniting rather than dividing' (p. 517). The second theme relates to their concerns with the after effects of the counterculture of the 1960s and the shockwaves it generated. Few have chronicled better the long decline of religion after the hazy days of 1968 and the expectations that year generated.

The third theme, a concern with religiosity, lends a distinctive property to the study, which points in the direction of substantive rather than functional understandings of religion. Questions dealing with religiosity relate to attendance at religious services, prayer, identity and the strength of belief and the significance of religion in daily life (p. 18). Putnam and Campbell make an important caveat to these indices, suggesting that, inadvertently, these are tilted towards evangelical Protestantism (p. 20). Whereas this brand is successful in terms of attracting and holding members, mainline Protestantism and in particular the Episcopalian Church are in precipitate decline. The influx of Latinos into Catholicism disguises its fall in affiliations.

The authors indicate that whilst there is no overall demographic trend in terms of gender, the slice of the population most turning away from religion are young men (p. 29). Responding to the illusions of inclusiveness, one pastor noted that 'the church's social goals cannot be accomplished if "half the society is not present"' (p. 204). This loss underlines the degree to which ecclesial culture is not a site for experiments in equality of opportunity.

The data findings are well interspersed with vignettes, or portraits (well done) of Episcopalian, Mormon, Black Protestant Evangelical and Lutheran churches and a Synagogue. There are vignettes of two Catholic churches, both in inner city locations, mainly dealing with immigrants. An account of a suburban 'normal' Catholic church is missing. The appraisals of two Boston Episcopalian churches are interesting. Both survive on the basis of refugees from more orthodox churches, notably Catholicism. The Episcopalian Church for some, as in the case of Trinity Boston, 'seeks to be a safe haven for the spiritually ambivalent' (p. 51) or put another way, it scores by offering 'all of the pageantry, none of the guilt' (p. 52). The resources, financial and of personnel to generate social networking among the

congregations are awesome, especially in another church examined: Saddleback, California. It is a megachurch with a membership of 100,000, a weekend attendance of 22,000 and is 'seeker sensitive' in attracting unchurched Christians (p. 55). Servicing these congregational needs requires large scale investment in finance and personnel. Such are the demands of raising and sustaining social capital that an Episcopalian priest in Trinity Boston felt that he had become an 'events coordinator' (p. 45).

Chapters 3–4 on the slow decline of religion are exemplary. The drop occurs from a period of 'exceptional religious observance in America' between the late 1940s to the early 1960s (p. 83). Attitudes to the civic duty to be engaged in religion came to the fore in the early 1960s (pp. 87–88). The study is excellent on the social disarray and the loss of self-confidence which the late 1960s generated, underlining again, how unlucky Vatican II was in terms of the era into which it launched its reforms. This shock to traditional religions in the late 1960s is well chronicled. In the study, two aftershocks are noted.

The first aftershock, almost as a response, relates to the rise of religious conservatism in the 1970s and 1980s. This period marked the decline of mainstream Protestant denominations and the rise of Evangelical Protestantism, a significant number being converts (p. 110). The second aftershock, perhaps the most significant, occurring in the 1990s and 2000s, relates to youthful disaffection with religion. This is expressed in terms of the rise of 'nones' or those with no religion, so that by 2010 their numbers exceed those for Evangelical Protestants (p. 125). Tolerant attitudes to homosexuality and sexual morality in general underline this disengagement from religion by young people. But in dealing with abortion, the study draws out unexpectedly ambivalent attitudes amongst young people (pp. 406–414). They are referred to as the Juno generation. Ultrasound images of the unborn are also mentioned as fuelling this ambivalence towards abortion.

Chapter 5 on conversions and movements in and out of religion provides a telling account of the absence of commitment to religion found in the study, a weakness that is presented as 'strength', a gift of American grace. The fluidity of movement is well illustrated, but in an unsettling way. American religion might be strong on networking and social capital, but beneath is an extraordinary amount of leaving and arriving that affirms tenets of the secularisation thesis, that choice and individualism characterise the ethos of modernity where binding in belief is doomed to loosen. Catholicism and mainline Protestantism have not been the beneficiaries of these movements between religions. As the study indicates, there has been a softening of social and cultural boundaries among religious traditions but that in demographic terms none of these have been beneficiaries of this malleability.

The degree to which the middle classes are the beneficiaries of *American Grace* emerges well in chapter 8. Nevertheless, the study shows well the way churches provide unique sites for the intermingling all classes. Unexpectedly, the study suggests religious women tend be less feminist than their secular counterparts. Religion emerges as a feminine sphere (p. 233). An unexpected statistic (amongst many in the study) indicates that Black Evangelical Church members tend to be middle class with high levels of higher education and are more devout than other Evangelical Protestants (pp. 274–275). This chapter 9 on ethnicity is especially good on the impact of Latino immigration on American Catholicism. Without this immigration of Latinos, as the study notes, Catholicism ‘would have experienced a catastrophic collapse’ (p. 299). Chapters 10 and 11 on politics are especially useful in drawing attention to the links between the Democratic and Republican parties in relation to religion, where each generate distrust and suspicion.

The last three chapters, 13–15, turn to the puzzle of pluralism and the grace of tolerance that characterises American religion. Entitled ‘A House Divided’, chapter 14 provides intriguing contrasts over how religious and secular American regard each other as tolerant, their attitudes to clear guidelines on good and evil and how those in religion view their rivals. Jews, mainline Protestants and Catholics receive positive assessments, while Mormons, Buddhists and Muslims emerge as unpopular (pp. 506–507). Strangely, the prospect of a Buddhist temple in a neighbourhood attracts the least welcome (pp. 513–514), although why attitudes to mosques being built were left unexplored is puzzling. But it is in chapters 13 and 15 that the heart of the study emerges.

Chapter 13 on good neighbourliness and religion indicates why a secularised version of the Big Society as advocated by the Coalition in the United Kingdom is unlikely to work. The nub of the study’s finding is that ‘religious American are up to twice as active civically as secular Americans’ (p. 454). The data to confirm this point relates to membership of communal organisations, participation in local civic and political life, and, unexpectedly, pressure for local social or political reform (pp. 454–457). Religiosity is imported into good neighbourly practice. Explaining these findings, Putnam and Campbell suggest the answer lies in altruism and empathy (p. 465).

In this chapter the value of belonging arises in the context of the image of a particular God. Almost as a prelude to what emerges in chapter 15, Putnam and Campbell admit that ‘we can occasionally find trace effects of theology on people’s civic behaviour’. More significantly, it is in church attendance, in congregational practice and social networking that the issue of trust is to be found (p. 471). In this setting, ‘religious ties seem to be a kind of supercharged friendship’ (p. 473). But a worry starts to emerge around the matter

of tolerance. What is presented as 'tolerance' is non-judgemental, as if this was virtue in itself, something to grow into that solves the puzzle of religious pluralism. It is in chapter 15 that the theological price of this clubbable form of religion appears.

Building on the notion that '*most Americans are intimately connected with people of other faiths*' (p. 526), Putnam and Campbell encounter what they term the 'Aunt Susan Principle'. The term might become a similar touchstone for theologians as 'Sheilaism' to be found in Bellah's *Habits of the Heart*. The latter term referred to a young nurse who exercised private judgement in finding faith based on simple tenets of care and love. She became representative of a certain form of American religion, one with a self-resourced spirituality whose authenticity is a matter of her personal opinion. In this study, she might be a niece of Aunt Susan.

Aunt Susan is a woman of good works who, regardless of her faith will go to heaven. This 'equal opportunity heaven' (p. 535) reflects a domain finding of the study that 'a whopping 89 percent of Americans believe that heaven is not reserved for those who share their religious faith' (p. 534). This finding perplexed Putnam and Campbell who wondered what had happened to John 14:6 (p. 536). An extraordinary disconnection between clerical and lay attitudes towards heaven emerged in the study. When Putnam gave the above figure to the Missouri Synod Lutherans, a theologian stated that those with such views were wrong and, anyhow, that it did not apply to their church. Putnam gleefully indicates that 'what ensued was social science research in real time', for on going to his laptop, he read out that 86% of members of that church believed 'that a good person who is not of their faith could indeed go to heaven'. In response, 'these theologians were stunned in to silence. One wanly said that as teachers of the Word, they had failed'. This comes to the kernel of the study, that 'most Americans do not believe that those with a different religious faith are damned'. The implication is that if they are not damned, then by default they go to heaven. That judgement of who goes where stems not from Revelation or Redemption and involves 'the disregard of the theology of their religions'. The fulcrum point of religion and the one to which they defer in ultimate matters rests on their personal social networks (p. 540).

What emerges strikingly from the study is the paradox (one encountered in Durkheim) that the more attractive religion is in terms of generating social solidarity, networking, association and acceptance, the more its exclusive theological properties risk become diluted in the interests of servicing these social dimensions. The implication is that the values of inclusivism, community and active participation, which theologians so affirm in the interests of realising a credible place within society, risk generating an unexpected reductionism of theological tenets in practice. Oddly, the more religion cast in the

above terms 'succeeds', the more in theological terms it 'fails', if the central finding of the study is to be understood.

This point is illustrated in another finding in the study, that those who believe in 'one true religion' are a minority, below 10 percent for 'Anglo' Catholics (as against Latinos) (p. 546). In an odd comment, the decline of 'true believers' which might be treated as the vice of modernity, is used to illustrate the virtues of American religion as a 'faith without fanaticism' (p. 547). In this sense, a civil religion which thrives is juxtaposed to a theologically informed religion which wilts, thus in a curious way endorsing the secularisation thesis. If there is an American grace in its religion, it is one self-endowed and is not bestowed gratuitously by some act of Redemption.

The ironic outcome of the study is to suggest that if there is exceptionalism in American society, it arises less from its immunity to secularity and more from the peculiarity of the transmutation of its religion into realms of civility and networking only too well fitted for sociological understandings. In coming to such a conclusion, this is not to belittle the study, but to confirm its properties of making real discoveries that mark out new insights, new data and configurations and understandings of matters of vital importance at the intersections of religion and civil society. In short, this is a study of religion and social science at its very best and one that should occasion widespread debate. The study is decidedly timely.

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