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American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us

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Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, with Shaylyn Romney Garrett. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010

Reviewed by James W. Phillips

American Grace is the next pivotal work within the social scientific study of religion that LDS readers should find interesting on many levels, including the extensive attention it gives to Mormonism. In this work, Robert Putnam (author of the national bestseller *Bowling Alone*) teams up with David Campbell (editor of *A Matter of Faith: Religion in the 2004 Presidential Election*) and field researcher Shayln Romney Garrett to examine the many facets of contemporary American religious pluralism. The authors use data from the nationally representative 2006 and 2007 waves of the Faith Matters survey, in addition to other surveys, alongside several in-depth observations of specific congregations.

Throughout the work, the authors manage to blend reports of macro-level trends of religious behaviors and attitudes with examples from “congregational vignettes”—richly described and detailed cases of Catholic, Jewish, African-American, Protestant, and Mormon congregations that act as a backdrop to the authors’ analyses. These descriptions offer a face and sense of immediacy to the study of American religion, which has been at times lacking in other such scholarly undertakings. In a sense, *American Grace* is both a reflection and a scrutiny of the many undercurrents involved with religion in American life, and, although the book is somewhat daunting in scope, the authors offer a mostly satisfactory analysis of both within-religion issues (religious switching, intermarriage, religious innovation, gender roles) and issues of how religion as an institution intertwines with other areas of society such as politics and ethnicity. Thus, *American Grace* offers a current treatment of several issues directly relevant both to LDS readers and to a general audience.

Throughout the work, the authors guide their analyses back to one central theme—how can American religious pluralism coexist with religious polarization? In other words, many religions have become entrenched with

one or the other side of various hot topics, such as female clergy, abortion, and gay rights, which results in a decline in “moderate” religious identities. Therefore, how can these many ideologically partitioned religions bridge their divisions and live in mutual toleration? The answer, which in a sentence does not do justice to these authors’ work, is “by creating a web of interlocking relationships among people of many different faiths” (550, see also 526–34). Through the social contact with others of different religious backgrounds—which is more and more likely in current America due to increased religious pluralism—a mutual respect and harmony arises. This premise rests much on Putnam’s social capital theory: through bridging contact with dissimilar others comes mutual exchange that can potentially benefit either party, along with the by-products of trust and understanding. Through contact with dissimilar religious groups comes harmony, or “American grace.”

The strengths of this book arise from the explanations and expounding of the contact-understanding focus. In the first several chapters, the authors offer a cogent historical background of the “shocks and after-shocks” of American religious history. From the post-World War II rise of fundamentalism, through the Civil Rights Movement, and subsequent rise of the Religious Right, the authors weave a historical context to explain the current state of affairs in American religion. For example, several historical factors help explain the rise of religious “nones” (those who claim no religious affiliation) in the last decade. The authors effectively argue that the rise in religious nones is due in part to a reaction against increased visibility of religious conservatism in the 1990s (124–27). Their historical rationale of the ebb and flow of religious movements is convincing, but their most original contribution might be in revealing several unexpected characteristics of the religiously disaffiliated. Contrary to supposition, religious nones are not “uniformly unbelievers” (125) or a product of being raised as unaffiliated—many Americans today maintain religious beliefs and behaviors but are simply less involved with an organized religion. In several examples, the authors describe religions as “fuzzy around the edges” and that every denomination has “roughly 10 percent who are liminal members, neither entirely in nor entirely out” (136). Both identifying and parsing out the staunch nones from the liminal nones is an exciting new development.¹

Additionally, the historical backdrop behind modern-day adolescent religious disaffiliation or moralistic therapeutic deism² is of particular interest. Highlighting the intertwining of religion with political issues, the authors offer several insights into why adolescents, whether Mormon, Protestant, Catholic, or otherwise, seem to lean more toward

having little or no religious identity. With sound argument, the authors explain much of the rise of adolescent disaffiliation as a reaction against what youth see as a “judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical, and too political” religious landscape (121).

The “congregational vignettes” in chapters 2, 7, and 10 offer insightful comparisons of the difficulties various American religions face. Each religion experiences issues of modernity differently, with one or more themes of ethnicity, politics, feminism, race issues, class inequality, and religious innovation at the forefront for some and not others. The Mormon vignette (351–68) offers a focus on religion and politics, the Chicago Catholic parish vignette (211–30) more on ethnicity and race issues, and the Massachusetts Episcopal vignette (37–54) on religious innovation. Other in-depth observations differ in their foci, and the comparative discussion among each offers a hands-on feeling for the primary challenges many churches confront.

At times the work is perhaps too expansive, thus leaving some topics abbreviated. For example, an explanation of various religions’ growth and decline is repeated in several sections. The treatment of this topic occurs by expounding the strict church or religious market theory—where some churches do better at “marketing” themselves to potential adherents than others who fail to innovate or become mainline and subsequently lose adherents. The authors do contribute to explaining religious growth and decline by shedding light on updated trends of religious switching and successful religious socialization/transmission of beliefs from parent to child. However, the bulk of their ideas presented on religious growth and decline are more fully developed elsewhere.³ Nonetheless, the book is highly informative, methodologically sound, and well worth readers’ attention, especially to an LDS audience, due partly to the attention that Mormonism receives.

The authors offer contemporary evidence that Mormons are most devout in terms of religiosity, most likely to stay in the religion from childhood to adulthood, most opposed to religious intermarriage, most likely to believe there is one true religion—yet most likely to believe that people not of the faith, including non-Christians, can go to heaven—and also have the highest “in-group attachment,” (504) or feelings of warmth toward others in their religion. Interestingly, the authors explain that the notion of Mormon in-group attachment is due to characteristics of ethnicity—not that Mormonism is an ethnicity per se, but that it does have “a shared history, legacy of persecution, mass migration, and geographic concentration” (504) that is characteristic of many ethnicities. Additionally, Mormons are perceived quite negatively when rated by those of various other religions. When reporting how warmly people feel toward

various religions, at the negative end of the scale are Muslims, then Buddhists, then Mormons, and *then* the nonreligious. Essentially, the average American feels warmer to someone who has *no* religion than someone who is Mormon (507–9).

The authors highlight several possible explanations for the negative perception Mormons (and Muslims and Buddhists) receive. It could be due to their relatively small size, which promotes unfamiliarity and minority group status, or the negative media portrayals of fringe elements “whether it is fundamentalist polygamists or jihadists” (506). Not fitting into America’s traditionally considered Judeo-Christian framework is another possibility. Perhaps the most compelling explanation the authors give is the argument for network homogeneity. If the “American Grace” proposition is true—through social contact comes understanding and harmony—then a religion marked with one of the highest rates of religious homogeneity among family, friends, and neighbors (525, 534) would be negatively perceived. The solution? “We would expect their image problem to disappear even more rapidly as more and more Americans count . . . a Mormon among their friends and family” (534). Religious bridging, while still maintaining strong religious identification, seems to be the issue for Mormonism in the future.

I highly recommend this book for any religious American—it is a delight for the religious leader, social scientist, or anyone with a general interest in religion, but I offer a similar caution that Bruce Chadwick and Richard McClendon⁴ have offered. When these types of books come along, LDS readers may be tempted to focus entirely on data relevant to all things LDS. It would be a mistake to miss the immensely insightful descriptions and comparisons found throughout the work.

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1. Chaeyoon Lim, Carol Ann MacGregor, and Robert D. Putnam, “Secular and Liminal: Discovering Heterogeneity among Religious Nones,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 4 (2010): 596–618.

2. This phrase comes from the work of Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). It is a label for the common religious

mind-set of American adolescents, which supposes that one is in favor with God by generally doing the right thing (moralistic), that God is there when one needs help (therapeutic), and that God steps in occasionally when one requests it but otherwise stays out of one's life (deism).

3. See, for example, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

4. Bruce A. Chadwick and Richard J. McClendon, review of *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *BYU Studies* 45, no. 2 (2006): 167–72.