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

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

Review by Victoria Neuman

It is common knowledge that America has long touted itself as the champion of religious freedom and, consequently, has a diverse array of faiths practiced throughout its history. What makes this phenomenon so significant is that it occurs simultaneously with the fact that America is one of the most religiously devout nations in the world. Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell's mammoth book, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, is an attempt to explain both the polarization and pluralism of American religion.

Massive in scope, *American Grace* is, at its best, a comprehensive analysis of everything you ever wanted to know about religion in America. Some of their information is nothing more than recycled common knowledge (religious issues can determine your political leanings) and some is original and interesting (roughly the same percentage of Americans attend church today as in the 1940s), making this book neither a treasure nor a throwaway. At times a bit exhaustive with its statistics, bar graphs, and trend charts, the authors want to make it absolutely clear that they have done their research. Much, but not all, of their statistical information comes from the results of the Faith Matters survey, one that they themselves conducted. This book is obviously the product of many years of research and consideration, and this effort does not go unnoticed.

American Grace at 550 pages long is no quick read, but many of the chapters can function on their own, making the book useful as a reference text. Want a historical overview of religion in America in the last half-century? See Chapter 3. Interested in the role of race in religion? See Chapter 9. Bored with purely academic discourse? See Chapters 2, 7, and 10, the "Vignettes" chapters, informal nonfiction case studies of various churches and places of worship in America. *American Grace* has a little something for any reader, but taken as a whole it can be a large pill to swallow.

At its core, this book is about the relationships that make religious pluralism a reality in American culture, what the authors call "America's grace". They note that there has never been a religious war in America, and while tensions may be high in the political arena over certain religious issues, Americans are, for the most part, tolerant of other faiths. The authors argue that America is "religiously diverse and religiously devout because it is difficult to damn those you know and love"

(517), certainly a plausible explanation that rests on the strength and quantity of authentic interfaith families and relationships. Putnam and Campbell remind us here that for the sake of national peace and unity, a tolerant pluralism must reign in the face of great religious diversity.