

REVIEW

Robert Putnam and David Campbell

*American Grace:
How Religion Divides and Unites Us*

(New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), hardcover, 673 pp.

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Robert Putnam and David Campbell's *American Grace* is likely familiar to readers of this journal. It has been reviewed widely, by the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and many religious and academic publications and journals.

This review focuses on the longer-term implications of *American Grace* on Jewish-Christian relations in America. Among the book's many findings that observers of Jewish-Christian relations will surely want to consider, three stand out to this reviewer: (1) the theological gap between clergy and laity; (2) increasing rates of and acceptance of religious intermarriage; and (3) the measurable impact of having acquaintances from different faith communities.

Putnam and Campbell's research is overwhelmingly focused on "views from the pews," that is, on the religious beliefs of the members of religious communities rather than of the clergy (p. 33). But in the final chapter of the book, the authors consider the remarkable "ecumenism" of Americans' views of salvation by contrasting it with the beliefs of religious leaders. In significant majorities, American Christians told researchers that they believe non-Christians can achieve salvation. For example, 65% of Evangelical Protestants, 69% of Black Protestants, 82% of Mainline Protestants, 89% of Catholics, and 100% of Mormons surveyed said that salvation extends to non-Christians (p. 536).

By contrast, most Christian *clergy* agreed with the statement that "there is no way to salvation but through belief in Jesus Christ." A majority of clergy from mainline denominations such as the Presbyterian Church, USA (57%), United Methodist Church (59%), and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in American (63%), and very strong majorities of clergy from Evangelical and Black Protestant denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention (97%), Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (98%), African Methodist Episcopal Church (98%), Presbyterian Church in America (100%), and Church of God in Christ (100%), agreed with that statement. Clergy were "far more likely to see a single road to heaven" (p. 539).

Theological gaps between the pulpit and the pews are surely as old as religion itself. However, this particular gap is a stark reminder to those involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue to pay close attention to whom one is in dialogue with (clergy, lay people, or both), and to refrain from making generalizations about religious groups. The gap suggests that Jewish-Christian encounters may focus on different issues, depending on whether one is meeting with religious leaders or with laity.

The data on intermarriage should spark another rich discussion between Christians and Jews. *American Grace* puts intermarriage in its historical and multifaith context, providing a new

lens through which to view intermarriage: "The available data point unambiguously toward a gradual but inexorable softening of the once impermeable social and cultural boundaries among America's various religious traditions. The best evidence suggests that roughly *half* of all married Americans today are married to someone who came originally from a different religious tradition...and a bit fewer than *one third* of all marriages remain mixed today" (p. 148, emphasis in original). Marriages in which one partner converts to his or her spouse's tradition after the wedding, and those in which both partners convert to a third tradition, account for the gap between the number of 'originally' interfaith and currently interfaith marriages.

Since the first decade of the 20th century, when the national rate was 12%, intermarriage rates have steadily increased. This reflects both the actual rate of intermarriage and attitudes toward intermarriage: "In short, during the twentieth century both the norms governing religious intermarriage and actual marriage patterns moved toward greater interfaith openness and integration, as religiously insular generations were succeeded by their more open-minded children" (p. 153).

Curious readers may appreciate knowing that opposition to intermarriage is highest among Mormons and Jews (two-thirds oppose), somewhat strong among Evangelicals and Black Protestants (a little more than half), moderate among Catholics (a little more than 40%), and weak among Mainline Protestants (one-third or less). Actual intermarriage rates are lowest among Latino Catholics and Black Protestants (less than 20%), and grow among Mormons (one third), Evangelicals, Jews, "Anglo" Catholics, and Mainline Protestants (all above 50%).

Today there are many excellent institutions and support groups dedicated to serving interfaith families. But there does not appear to be a rich conversation between American Jews and Christians about how we deal with in-marriage and intermarriage. Such an exchange could be interesting on many levels. We could ask each other whether we worry about, or celebrate, intermarriage. We could discuss how we are both facing the same American context in our struggle to maintain our traditions for generations to come. We could find out how well intermarried couples are integrated into our communities. We could explore the finding that as many as *half* of intermarriages become in-marriages over time. We could examine the argument in *American Grace* that intermarriage is part of a pattern of intermingling that has reduced antisemitism in America.

That last point about tolerance is a highlight of the book. To the extent that *American Grace* has a thesis, it is that "interreligious mixing, mingling, and marrying have kept America's religious melting pot from boiling over" (p. 548). Putnam and Campbell convincingly show that "our friends affect how we perceive the religious groups to which our friends belong." Veterans of Jewish-Christian relations likely will not be surprised by this conclusion. But when confronted with data that show that who we know changes our attitudes toward others from that group, must not we also ask how such relationships affect our theology, religious practices, and eventually, our traditions themselves? Historically, relations between Jews and Christians have been marked by deep tension. *American Grace* shows that we have entered an era in America that is decidedly different. How might this congenial context influence our patterns of belief and practice?

In our generation, Jews and Christians have read scripture together, experienced each others' traditions and beliefs in respectful ways, and even engaged in the difficult discussions, for example, about contentious topics such as the contemporary Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *American Grace*, with its treasure trove of sociological data, promises to expand and deepen Jewish-Christian relations in new ways.