

American Grace

ROBERT PUTNAM

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ROBERT PUTNAM is Malkin Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University. He is a member of the National Academy of Sciences, British Academy, American Philosophical Society, and American Academy of Arts and Sciences and past president of the American Political Science Association. He was the 2006 recipient of the Skytte Prize and has served as an adviser to presidents and national leaders around the world. He has written more than a dozen books, including *Bowling Alone* and *Making Democracy Work*, both among the most cited publications in the social sciences in the past half century. The London *Sunday Times* has called him “the most influential academic in the world today.” Putnam’s most recent book, *American Grace*, coauthored with David Campbell of Notre Dame, focuses on the role of religion in American public life. Based on data from two of the most comprehensive national surveys on religion and civic engagement ever conducted, *American Grace* is the winner of the American Political Science Association’s 2011 Woodrow Wilson Foundation Award for the best book on government, politics, or international affairs.

LECTURE I.
AMERICANS ARE RELIGIOUSLY DEVOUT
AND DIVIDED, YET TOLERANT. WHY?

I am going to talk this evening about the puzzle of how America can be religiously devout, religiously diverse, and even polarized, but also religiously tolerant. First I have to establish that America is devout, and diverse, and nevertheless tolerant. And then I will unpack what I think the answer to that puzzle is.

Let me begin by describing briefly the evidence that I will be drawing on in these lectures.¹ My coauthor, David Campbell (he is a professor of political science at Notre Dame), and I conducted two rounds of interviews with a large nationally representative sample of roughly three thousand Americans, once in 2006 and then again in 2007. Evidence from those surveys will be an important part of both tonight's lecture and tomorrow's. Moreover, I believe that the truth lies at the confluence of multiple independent streams of evidence. Anything that is important enough to spend much time learning about ought to appear in more than one data set, so whenever possible, we have tried to confirm our findings, especially our more controversial findings, against all other available archives, like the General Social Survey and the National Election Study and a number of other surveys.

As well, we have done a baker's dozen congregational case studies across America. These are not formal, scientific case studies, but they offer a close-up of what it is like to sit in the pews of different congregations. Figure 1 shows the places we went to in our congregational studies: from a big megachurch in California, Rick Warren's church in Orange County, to a couple of small (and in one case failing) Episcopal churches in the Boston area. Also, we went to the oldest African Methodist Episcopal church in America, Bethel AME in Baltimore; a Jewish synagogue outside Chicago; some Catholic parishes in Chicago; and some very conservative religious places, including Living Word, a congregation in Minneapolis, where Michelle Bachman was, by chance, endorsed from the pulpit while we were there. I will not draw explicitly on these congregational close-ups

1. This lecture and the one that follows are closely drawn from Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), released simultaneously with the original delivery of the lectures. I thank Simon & Schuster for their agreement with this arrangement. Supporting documentation, methodological details, and citations to relevant literature are thus omitted from the lectures.

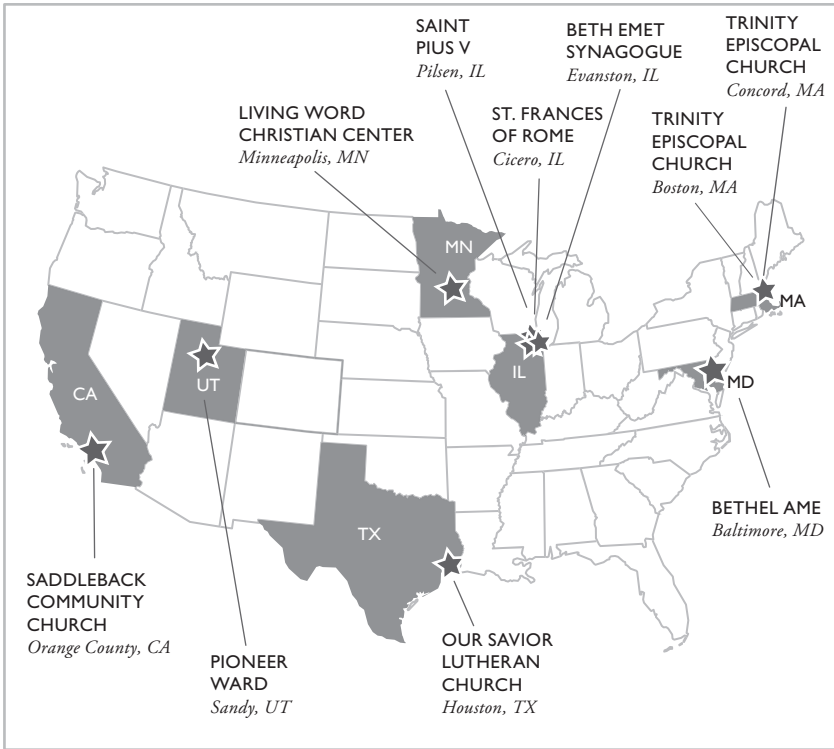


FIGURE 1. Congregational close-ups.

in these lectures, but they were in the back of our minds as we were doing our work.

Figure 2 shows the kind of evidence that leads us to say that America is very devout. Our measure here is what fraction of the population of various countries attends religious services weekly. At the top is Jordan, where something like 94 percent of Jordanians say that they attend religious services every week. You can see that America is by far the most religiously observant advanced country in the world. The bar just below us, the people who are just slightly less religious than Americans, is Iranians. This is a measure of church attendance, but you get the same basic story if you use many other measures of religiosity, like how important is religion in your daily life, or how much you believe in God. They all essentially show the same story: Americans are very religious. That is all I am going to say about the “devout” part of this triad (devout/diverse/tolerant). I do not mean that Americans are more saintly, but religion is a bigger deal in America than in any other advanced nation on earth.

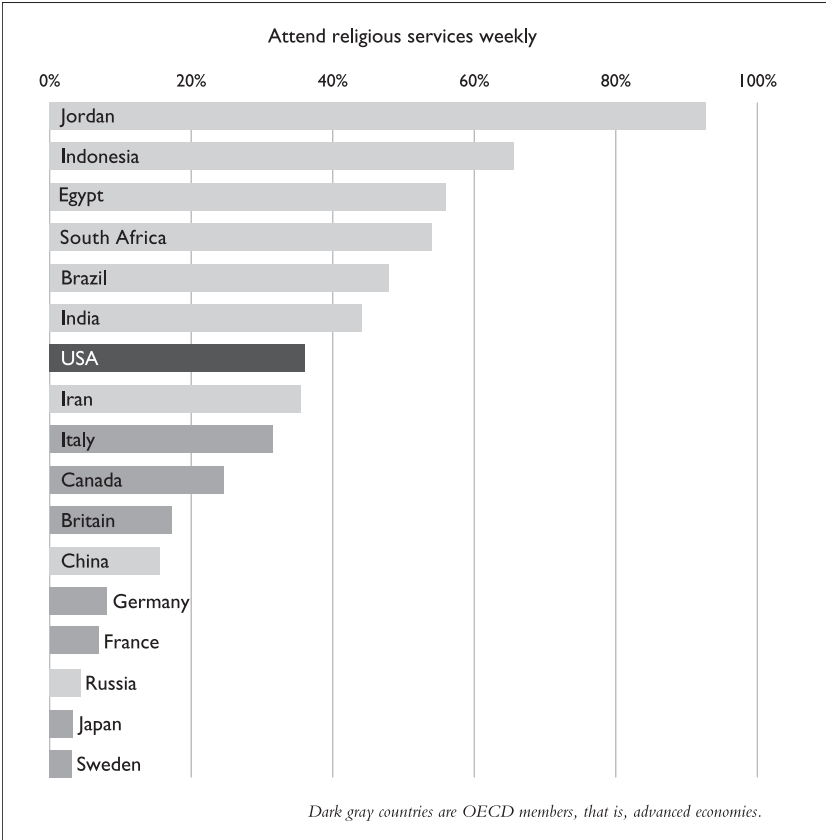


FIGURE 2. Compared to other industrialized nations, the U.S. has a high rate of weekly attendance at religious services.

We are also very diverse and increasingly polarized religiously. The subtitle of our book is *How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. Now, I am going to explain how America came to be as polarized as we are in religious terms. Let me begin in the 1950s. Those of you who have read *Bowling Alone* may think that every book I ever write begins, “In the beginning was the 1950s.” But in religious terms, I begin there because the 1950s was probably the most religious decade in American history, certainly in terms of observance; there is some evidence of higher than ever rates of church attendance, for example. The Gallup Poll reported in 1957 that 51 percent of Americans said they had attended church or religious services in the previous seven days.

There is some evidence that Americans probably have for some time exaggerated their church attendance and that we exaggerate our church

attendance even more now. But even if we deflate the numbers, weekly church attendance in the 1950s was very high. Other evidence included all-time record sales of Bibles and all-time records in church building. It does not matter what measure you use of religiosity in the Gallup Polls; religiosity was higher than ever in the 1950s.

And then like an earthquake, the 1960s happened. Almost literally overnight, America was transformed. By the end of the 1960s the rate of measured church attendance had fallen by seven percentage points, the largest drop in a single decade ever measured. All the measures show a tremendous drop in religiosity, in religious behavior, even beliefs in the course of the 1960s. But that was not the most important part of what was happening; the 1960s were above all about questioning authority. It was the time of the civil rights movement and the women's movement, and the anti-Vietnam War movement, and, above all, sex, drugs, and rock and roll. I will explain in a minute why I say "above all" sex, drugs, and rock and roll.

In 1959 most Americans were still worshiping weekly with their family and friends, but only seven years later, in 1966, *Time* magazine ran a cover story asking "Is God Dead?" That is symbolic of the transformation that was happening very quickly. The quickest changes affected sexual morality and sexual mores. For example, there is very good data year by year on whether premarital sex was believed to be wrong. The proportion of Americans who said that premarital sex was not wrong doubled from 24 percent to 47 percent in four years and then kept rising. This was an enormous transformation in a fundamental human norm in a very short period of time. The reason that it happened so rapidly was that a generation of Americans, the boomers, came of age, and about 80 percent of them believed that sex before marriage was not wrong, but they were coming into a population 80 percent of whom believed that it was wrong. This is one facet but probably the sharpest facet of the generational wars of the 1960s.

Most young people in that period experienced the 1960s as liberation: sexual liberation, gender liberation, black liberation, and so on. And the best predictor of who stopped going to church was feelings about premarital sex. The issue that distinguished churchgoers from nonchurchgoers was not abortion or theology. Someone who thought premarital sex was "always wrong" was nearly twice as likely to remain religiously observant and, in particular, to become an evangelical, compared to a similar person who thought it was acceptable. Premarital sex was not all that mattered,

of course, but it happened to be a good marker for deeply felt moral issues that influenced people's religious behavior. Who stayed in church and who left was not about politics, but about personal morality.

However, a large number of Americans experienced this revolution not as a liberation at all, but rather as a collapse of fundamental tenets of Western civilization. They experienced it as the coming apart of the moral foundation of the society in which they had grown up, and they were really unhappy. They felt alienated from, as they saw it, the main institutions of society that had gone along with this change, and they went looking, religiously speaking, for the part of the religious spectrum that was the most family oriented and most vocally opposed to the 1960s. And that turned out to be the evangelical Protestants. (Some might say "fundamentalist," but I am trying to avoid the use of "fundamentalist," because that is a somewhat loaded term.) As a result, the congregations of evangelical churches grew in the 1970s and 1980s, at the same time that there was a rapid decline in almost every other form of organized religion in America, certainly among the liberal Protestants, or what we call the mainline Protestants, that is, Methodists and Episcopalians and Lutherans and Presbyterians and so on. Evangelical Protestant churches did not grow quite as much as people think, but they grew at the same time that all their religious competitors were collapsing.

The Catholic Church was also collapsing. Many people continued to say that they were Catholic, but they stopped going to Mass. Indeed, of all people today who were raised as Catholic in America, nearly two-thirds are no longer practicing Catholics. Of those, slightly more than half have stopped even saying they are Catholic, and slightly less than half continue to call themselves Catholic, but it is a kind of ethnic Catholicism, because they don't really practice religion. Catholicism among native-born Americans simply disintegrated in this period.

Figure 3 shows changes in the fraction of all Americans who have been in different religious traditions over the past several decades. At the bottom are evangelical Protestants. The fraction of all Americans who are evangelical Protestants rises from about 23 percent in 1973 to about 28 percent by 1990. That is the rise of evangelicals. It was not huge, but it coincided with the decline of mainline Protestants from about 25 or 30 percent of all Americans to about 15 percent of all Americans.

Next are the "Anglo" Catholics, that is, Catholics who are non-Spanish speaking. It does not look like they decline very much, but that is because about half of the people in that band no longer go to Mass or

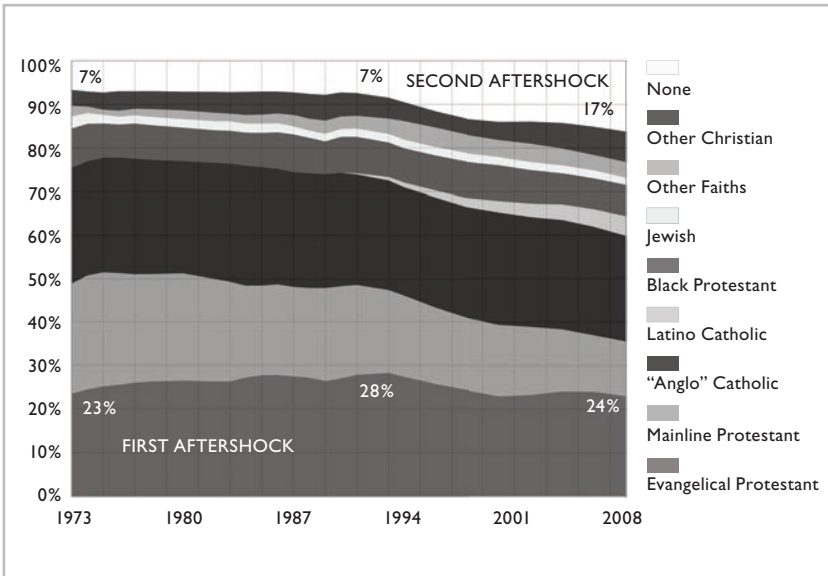


FIGURE 3. Trends in religious identity (1973–2008).

take part in the life of the church. The total number of active Catholics in America would have collapsed, as I said, except for the arrival, just in time, of Latino Catholics. The Catholic Church today is undergoing an enormously rapid transformation from what is now termed the Anglo Catholic Church, meaning Polish Americans, Irish Americans, Italian Americans, and so on. The children and grandchildren of the immigrants of a hundred years ago are flooding out one door of the Catholic Church, at just the moment that flooding in the other door are a lot of Latino immigrants. So the overall number of practicing Catholics is not changing much, but the character of those Catholics is changing. Of all of the people under thirty-five sitting in Mass last Sunday, about 60 percent were Spanish speaking. The Catholic Church is experiencing in an extremely concentrated way the same transformation the whole country is going through—absorbing masses of new immigrants. If the Catholic Church did not exist, all of us non-Catholics would have to invent it, because it is the only institution that is integrating the new immigrants with the existing population.

To repeat, the first seismic shock was the 1960s, which sent a whole lot of people off in a secular direction. Then a powerful aftershock sends another group of people off to the opposite, more religious, end of the spectrum. After they got there, politicians, especially Republican politicians,

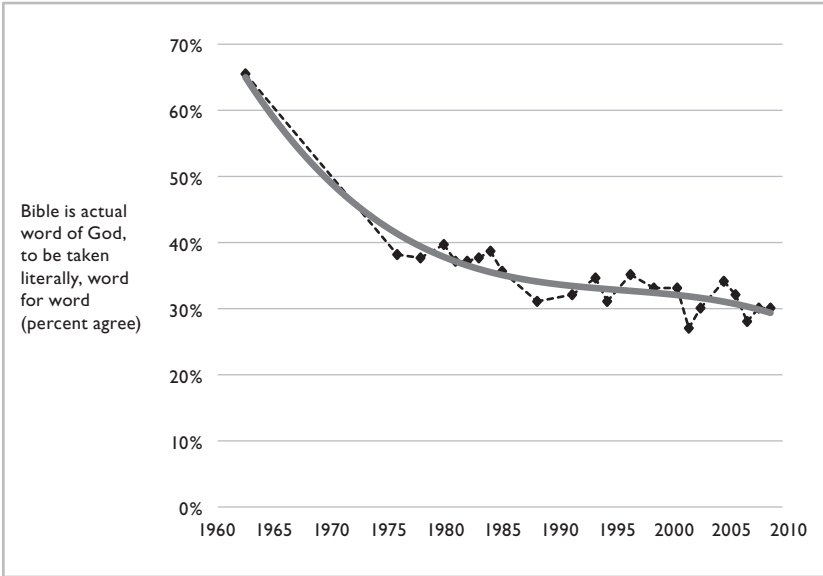


FIGURE 4. Theological fundamentalism fades throughout the rise of the religious right.

noticed this pool of people who shared conservative social values. These people were concerned about moral values, and they were in organizations that made it easy to reach them. This led to the development of the religious Right. The religious Right did not begin as a political movement; it began as a moral reaction to the sixties. But it became a political movement, and with the rise of the religious Right, abortion, followed later by homosexuality, became a major public issue dividing the parties. For the people in the religious Right, that was terrific news because at last, the institutions of the country were beginning to take seriously the values that they cherished in their private moral and religious lives. But starting in about 1990, a growing number of young people, especially, began to get upset about that increasing mixture of religion and politics.

The rise of the religious Right is not about theological fundamentalism. Figure 4 is a measure of the number of biblical literalists in America, that is, people who believe that the Bible is true in every respect. This number has been plummeting since the 1960s. It has fallen as a function, as you would guess, of education: as groups become more educated—even as evangelicals become more educated—they become less literalist in this sense, so the rise of the evangelicals was more about morality than about theology.

To summarize where we are so far, the 1960s created a huge movement to the secular end of the continuum. In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a movement to the religious end of the spectrum, and in the 1990s and 2000s, another movement, this time to the secular pole, in reaction to the rise of the religious Right and also to the fact that religion was becoming more narrowly confined in political terms. Figure 5 shows the so-called God gap, the difference between Republicans and Democrats in their frequency of attending church. This correlation (measured on the vertical axis) between politics and religion, which all of us have come to think of as a natural state of affairs, is actually a quite recent development. In the 1960s, as you can see, there were actually more Democrats in the pews than Republicans; that is, there was actually a slight God gap in the opposite direction. But in the 1970s and 1980s, as the first aftershock brings more social conservatives into conservative churches, a correlation between Republican politics and church attendance begins to emerge. And then beginning in the 1990s that correlation rises sharply, as the God gap becomes the central feature of American politics. So America has become more polarized religiously in two senses since the 1950s or even the 1960s. First, more of us are at the poles, either very religious or very secular. And second, that religious dimension is now more correlated with politics. There used to be many politically progressive religious folks and a lot of unchurched conservatives, but both are now endangered species.

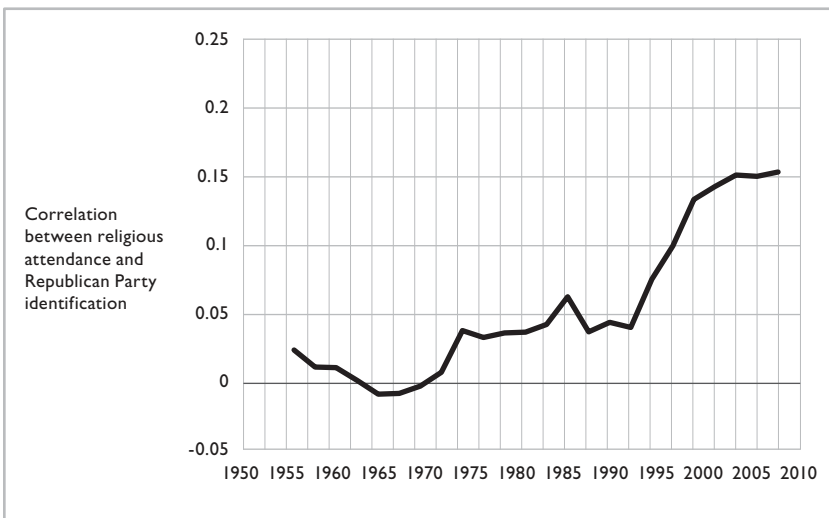


FIGURE 5. The emergent God gap between Republicans and Democrats (among white voters).

One interesting question is, what happens to those two vanishing categories, the progressives at church and the unchurched conservatives? That is to say, if there are progressives sitting in the pews who get more and more uncomfortable, do they change to being conservative, after hearing all these sermons? Do they adjust their politics to fit their religion? Or do they stop going to church, that is, adjusting their religion to fit their politics? I could not believe that people were changing their religion to fit their politics because for many people, religion is about their eternal soul. And how likely (I asked myself) is it that people would make a choice affecting their eternal soul based on how they felt about Bill Clinton or George W. Bush? But our data suggest that about two-thirds of the people in that situation have changed their religion to fit their politics.

That surprising fact is, in turn, related to our understanding of what David Campbell and I called “the second aftershock,” that is, the sharp turn away from religion over the past two decades, especially among younger Americans. Figure 6 illustrates that since the beginning of the 1990s, Americans have become steadily less happy about mixing politics and religion. Figure 7 then shows that just as our religion became more entangled with politics, there was an increase in the number of people who said they are not religious at all and they never go to church or religious services. Historically, the fraction of all Americans who said they had no religion or they did not have any religious affiliation was about 5 percent to 7 percent. As you can see in figure 7, in the middle of 1990 that figure suddenly jumps to 17 percent of all Americans who say they do not have any religion. They are not necessarily atheists—indeed, most of them think there might be a God—but they are upset about organized religion, and most of them do not go to church. This transformation is, once again, concentrated heavily among young people, as figure 8 shows. This is probably the single most important graph in the whole book. It includes only Americans in their twenties. The lighter line is the fraction of all Americans in their twenties who are evangelicals, and you see from 1973 until 1990 the increase in numbers of young people going to evangelical churches. That is the first aftershock.

In the same period, the number of young people who had no religious preference at all was more or less flat, even declining a little. Then in 1990 the fraction of young people who said they were evangelical Protestants began to decline, and the fraction of young people who said they had no religion at all began to rise, and this figure, which for the nation as a whole is now 17 percent, for young people is now 27 percent and rising fast.

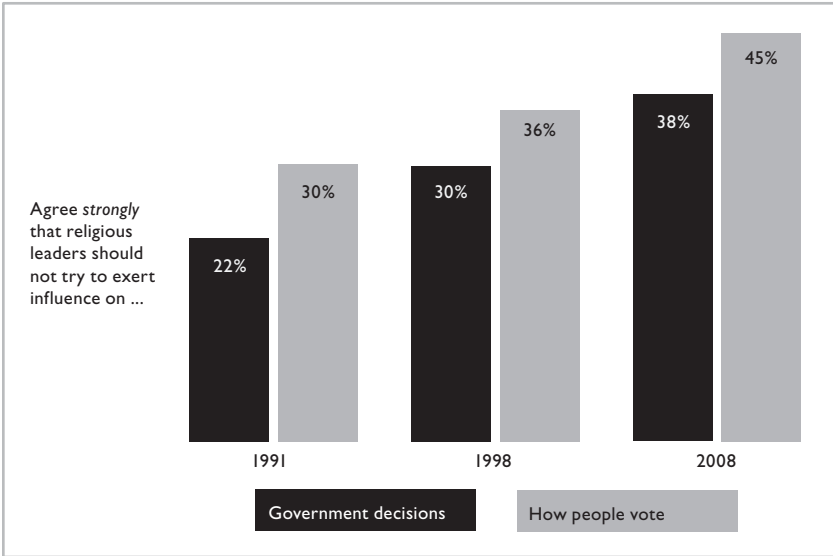


FIGURE 6. Growing objections to influence of religious leaders (1991–2008).

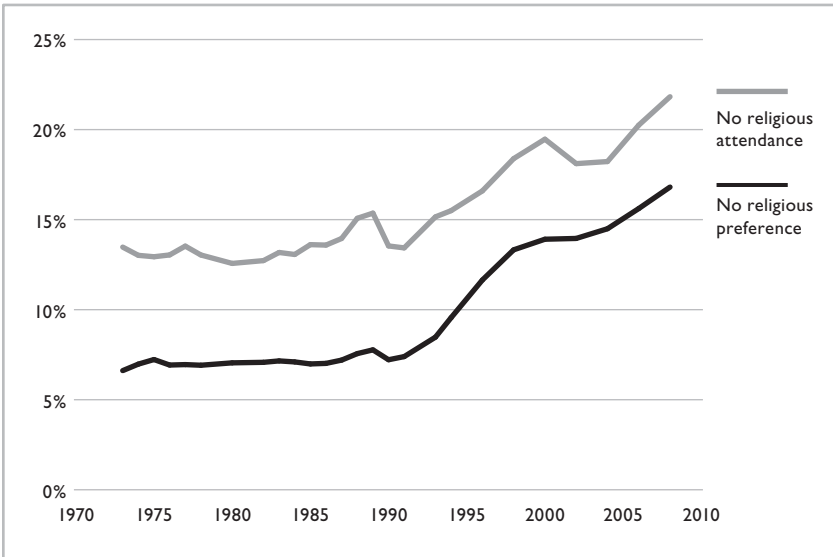


FIGURE 7. Emptying pews and increasing nones (1973–2008).

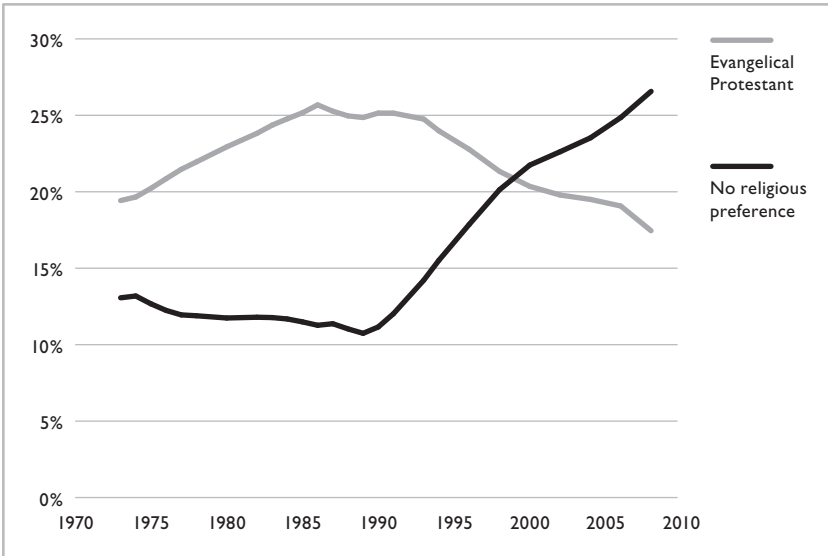


FIGURE 8. Evangelicals and “nones” among American youth (18–29), 1973–2008.

The rise of the young “nones” (those who say they have no religion) is hugely important. Over the course of any individual’s lifetime, his or her degree of religiosity will change. That is, people become more religious as they settle down and get married and have kids. Then it is sort of flat for a long time, and then when they get to sixty, on average, people become a little more religious, and it keeps rising. That is the life-cycle change, but different generations start that life-cycle pattern at different points. Historically, Americans started that life cycle with only 5 percent of them not being religious, but now young Americans are starting, roughly speaking, with about 30 percent of them being not religious. Even though these individual people, on average, will probably become a little more religious, they are never going to be as religious as their parents were. If the rise of the nones continues, it will dramatically change the composition of American society, because we are replacing a generation who go to church all the time with a generation who are much less likely to go to church or have other manifestations of religion. All this has happened pretty quickly. In 1990 there were twice as many evangelicals as nones among young people, and now that ratio is almost reversed. In sum, the three seismic shocks in the sphere of religion in America over the past half century have pushed Americans toward one of two camps—the deeply

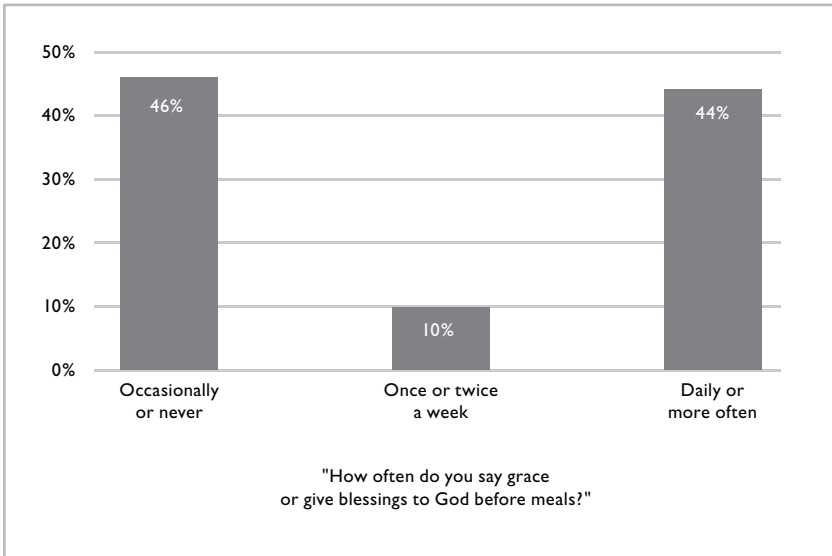


FIGURE 9. Half of Americans say grace daily, but half do so rarely or never.

religious, who are mostly politically conservative, and the increasingly secular, who are mostly politically progressive.

Figure 9 captures this sense of two Americas. Half of all Americans say grace almost every day, half of all Americans almost never say grace, and only 10 percent are in the middle. If we know whether a person is a grace-sayer or not, we also know his or her views on abortion, or homosexuality, or premarital sex, and we also know how he or she voted. Here we have two Americas: one America that says grace and is conservative on moral issues and politics and another America that is pretty secular, does not say grace, does not think of itself as very religious, and is pretty likely to be progressive. So we are very polarized.

I set out to show that America is devout and diverse, even polarized, and tolerant. Now I have to persuade you that the third point is true. We asked a number of questions of Americans about how they feel about people of other faiths. For example, we asked how warmly or coldly they felt about every major religious group in America: how do you feel about evangelicals, and Catholics, and mainline Protestants, and Jews, and Mormons, and Muslims, and “people who are not religious”—that is the way we phrased it. We did not use the word “atheist” because most unbelieving Americans do not actually use the word “atheist” to describe themselves. A tiny fraction of all Americans say that they are “atheists,” though

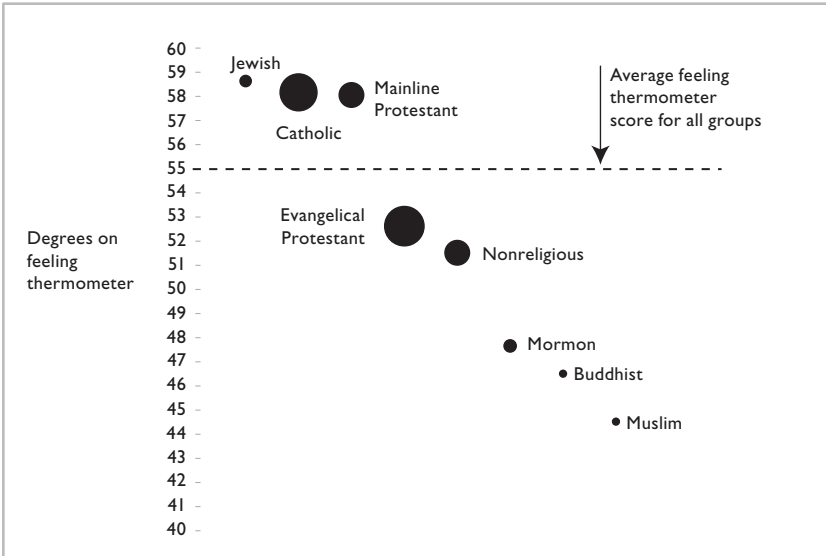


FIGURE 10. Americans feel warmest toward Jews, mainline protestants, and Catholics (scores reflect how everyone else feels about each group; size of circle represents that group's share of the population).

a larger fraction, probably 5 percent, are atheist in their beliefs, and then of course there are all these new nones who are not very religious, but who are not atheists. So we asked everyone, including religious Americans, how they felt about “people who are not religious.”

The “feeling thermometer” in figure 10 shows how Americans feel about persons of other faiths. The vertical axis is how warm or cold people feel toward a given group among the people who are not in that group. The figure at the top left is for Jews: how do people who are not Jews feel about Jews, how do people who are not Catholics feel about Catholics, and so on. (The size of the circle represents how big the group is.) As you can see, the most popular religious group in America religiously is the Jews. This is not to say that anti-Semitism has vanished. That would be obviously wrong. Nationwide, however, Jews get rated quite favorably. Catholics are also pretty highly rated by non-Catholics. And next come mainline Protestants, that is, Methodists or Episcopalians, or Presbyterians, or whatever. Evangelical Protestants are a little farther down, below average but still above the 50-50 lukewarm mark. Nonreligious people are a little less popular than the evangelical Protestants. Below them are the Mormons and Buddhists and Muslims.

Muslims are the least-popular religious group in America, although it is important to pay attention to where they rank with these other two groups, because they are only a little more unpopular than Buddhists and Mormons. The unpopularity of Muslims might be due to terrorism, but why are Americans so hostile to Buddhists? The average American does not know much about Buddhism, probably does not even know that they are pretty peaceful, but just that they are different. But, of course, if being different explains why the Buddhists are down there, it may explain why the Muslims are down there, because we do not know much about Muslims, either. Most Islamophobia is probably not about terrorism and 9/11—some of it is, of course—but because we just don't know any Muslims. Then there are the Mormons. Why are they ranked down there? I will come back to that shortly.

It is true that we have these three groups, Muslims, Mormons, and Buddhists, down in the not very well-liked category. But most religious groups in America are warmly thought of by people not in those groups. That is unlike political parties. If you ask Republicans how they feel about Democrats or Democrats how they feel about Republicans, they are way down on this scale. Liberals are rated by nonliberals, and conservatives are rated by nonconservatives, just about where Muslims are rated by non-Muslims and far below the equivalent scores for all other religious groups. We are much less divided in religious terms than we are in political terms.

We asked all of our respondents whether religious diversity has been good for America or bad for America. If you are not very religious, the answer to that seems obvious. Of course, diversity of anything is good nowadays, and so maybe religious diversity is good. The amazing thing is that three-quarters of the most religious tenth of Americans say that diversity is good for America. (See figure 11.) Now how could people who are really religious, and who believe that they have the right answer, believe that it is good to have other kinds of religions? Critics sometimes loosely claim that highly religious Americans are Taliban-like, but that is not a very Taliban-like response.

Figure 12 shows responses to the question of whether a person can be a good American even if he does not have any religious faith. It is of course not surprising that seculars say people like us can be good Americans. It is a lot more surprising that even the most religious people say someone who is not religious can still be a good American. Then we asked, in effect, whether religion is basically a good influence on American life or a

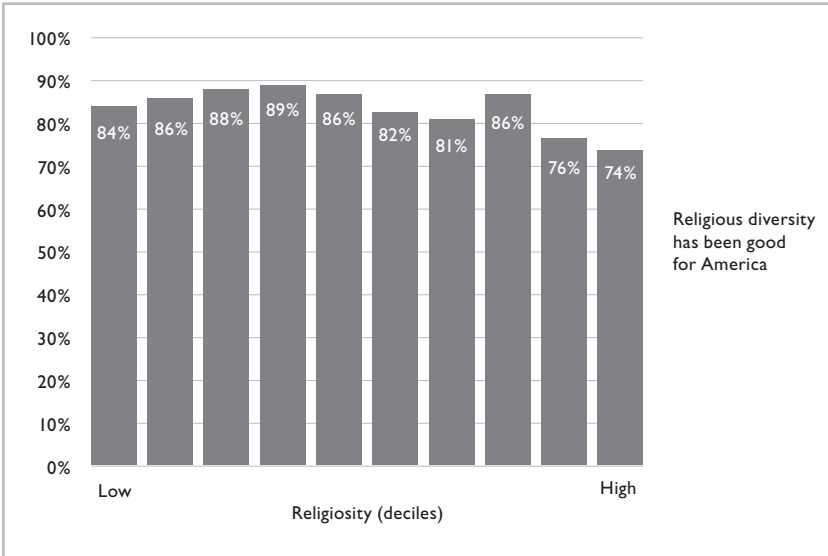


FIGURE 11. Regardless of their level of religiosity, Americans value religious diversity.

bad influence (figure 13).² It is not surprising that 98 percent of the most religious people think religion is good for America. At the other end of the spectrum, many of the most secular tenth of Americans think it is not good. But more than half of the next most secular Americans, who almost never attend religious services themselves, and are not even sure they believe in God, say that religion is good for America. In short, secular Americans, except for the most extreme among them, seem surprisingly open to the idea that religion should play an important part in American life, just as the most religious people in America seem surprisingly open toward nonreligious people.

We also asked those respondents who indicated that they believe in heaven (and 83 percent of Americans do, even more than say they believe in life after death!) if a good person not of their faith could go to heaven (figure 14), and the overwhelming majority said yes. Even 83 percent of evangelical Protestants say that those not of their faith could go to heaven. Then it occurred to us that maybe that is a Baptist saying that a couple of

2. Strictly speaking, we asked whether the influence of religion on American life was increasing or decreasing and then whether that was a good thing or a bad thing. From the sequence of responses, we inferred whether they favored or opposed the influence of religion.

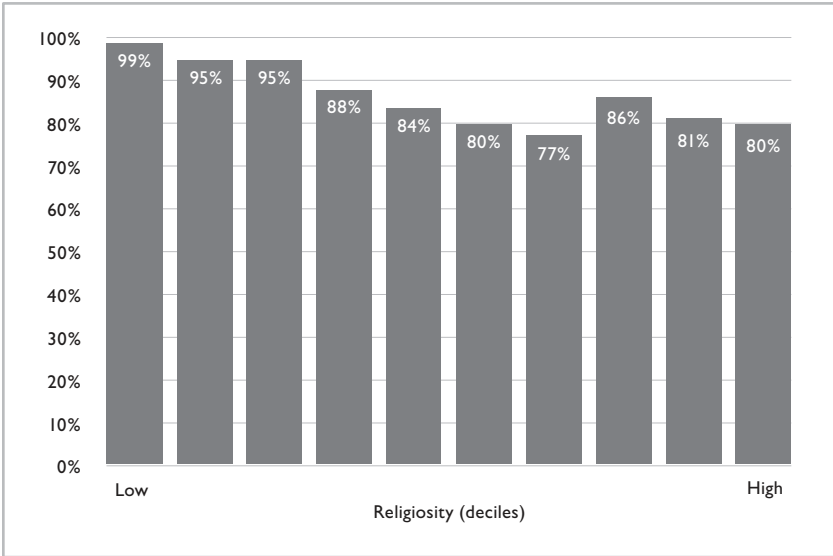


FIGURE 12. A person can be a good American even if he does not have religious faith.

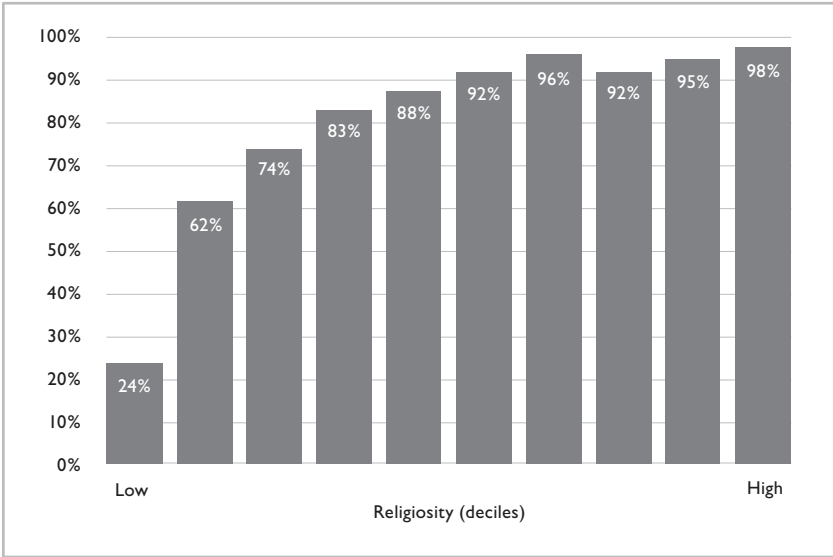


FIGURE 13. Religion is a good influence on American life.

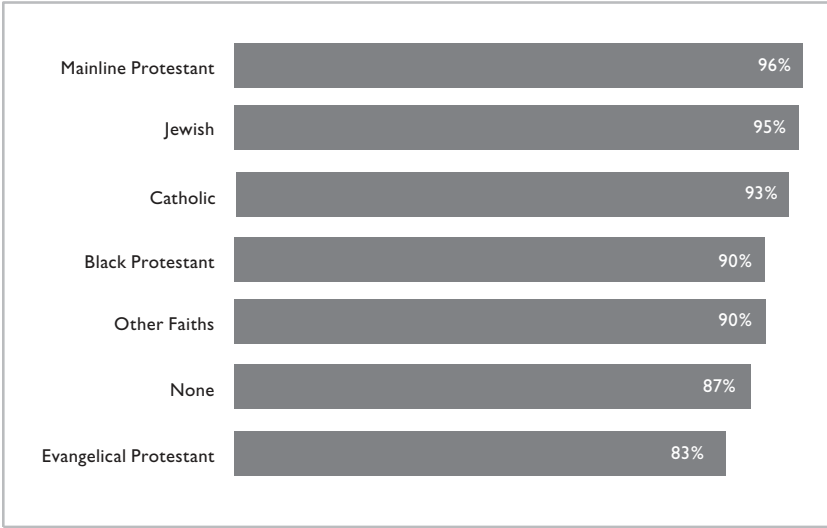


FIGURE 14. Americans overwhelmingly believe that good people of other religions can go to heaven.

Methodists are going to make it in. So if people had said, “Yes, people not of my faith can go to heaven,” we said, “Are you sure? Do you mean non-Christians can go to heaven?” Figure 15 shows the answers. Most Mormons and most Catholics and most mainline Protestants, and even most evangelical Protestants, say that you do not have to be Christian to go to heaven. It is not that you do not have to be a Baptist; you do not even have to be Christian to go to heaven. That response from Bible-believing evangelicals is shocking, because it is the wrong answer, theologically speaking. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the light. Except through me there is no access to the Father.” That is pretty clear. But these people got it wrong.

Finally, we asked people the following question: “Would you say that there is truth in one religion and not others [we could call that the “true believers” option] or that there is very little truth in any religion [that is, the militantly secular approach], or would you say there are truths in many religions?” (figure 16). If you believe in the full “culture wars” argument, then most Americans should fall in one of the first two categories. In fact, about 8 percent of Americans say there is very little truth in any religion. About 12 percent of Americans are the “my way or the highway” folks who say there is one true religion, and it is mine. Fully 80 percent of all Americans pick the more tolerant response that there are truths in

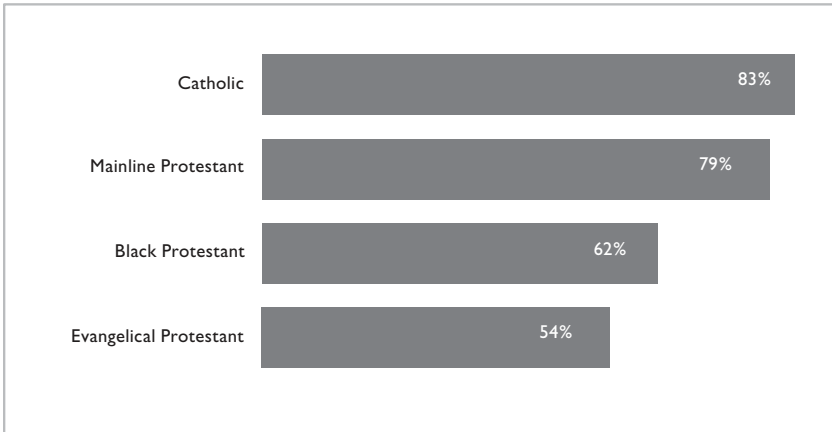


FIGURE 15. Even when those other religions are not christian.

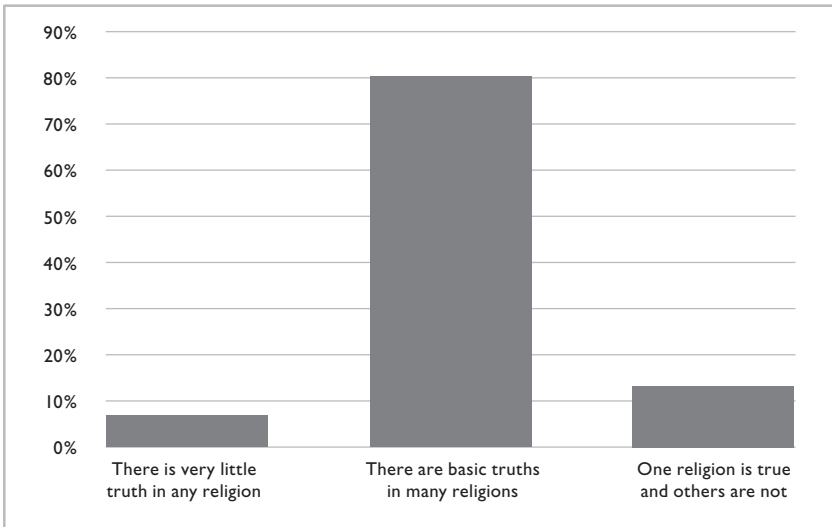


FIGURE 16. Few Americans are “true believers”.

many religions. Figure 17 shows how many true believers there are within various religions, that is, people who say there is one true religion, and it is mine. That perspective accounts for only 25 percent of Mormons, only 20 percent of evangelical Protestants, and very, very few Catholics or Jews or mainline Protestants.

The people who say there is very little truth in any religion represent the worst fears of the highly religious people. There are only 8 percent

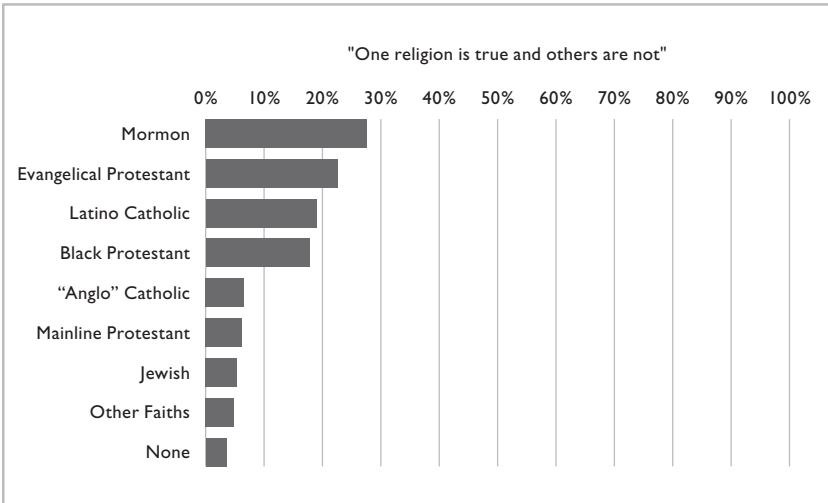


FIGURE 17. One true religion?

of them, in fact, but the religious people think that is what most secular Americans are like. And the one-true-religion people, whom we call the intolerant tenth, represent the worst fears of secular Americans, who think that's what all religious people believe, though in fact, they represent only a small minority. Each side holds nightmarish views about what the other side believes, when actually Americans are much less divided about religion than we think we are.

So far I have shown that America is religiously devout and religiously diverse, but also religiously tolerant. But in most parts of the world where people are this devout and this diverse, there is mayhem, not tolerance. Think of Belfast, Bombay, Beirut, Baghdad, Bosnia. So how can the United States be devout and diverse and nevertheless tolerant? This, at last, is the central puzzle I address in this essay.

There are many possible answers. Part of it has to do with the First Amendment and the separation of church and state. But the part I want to emphasize is that at the very same time we have become more polarized publicly in religious terms, we have been weaving together deeply personal ties across all of these boundaries.

First, about a third of all Americans are no longer part of the religious tradition in which they were raised. It is a little bit more than one-third if you count a Methodist becoming a Lutheran as a change. But if you do not count that as a change, but just count Jews to Catholics, or Catholics

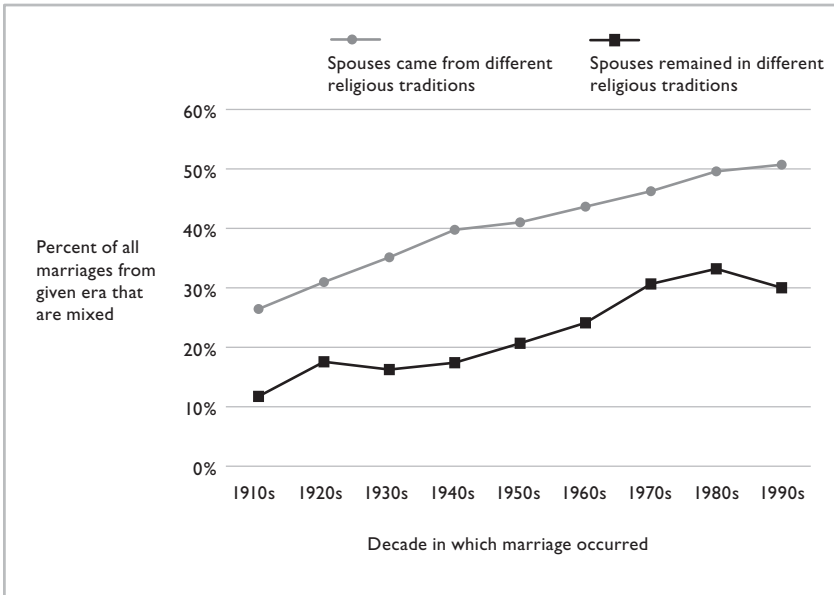


FIGURE 18. Interfaith marriage became more common throughout the 20th century.

to Mormons, or evangelicals to mainline Protestants, or any of those to nones, then about a third of all Americans have changed their religion. What that means is that about a third of all Americans are now in a religious tradition different from their parents or from their own kids.

Second, over this same period, the rate of interfaith marriage has also increased. So, the marriage of Chelsea Clinton, raised as a Methodist, to a Jew is completely normal today, though it would have been anything but normal a generation or two ago. Most marriages nowadays cross religious lines, and figure 18 shows what that looks like over time. The top line represents marriages among people who originally came from different faiths. So about 25 percent of marriages in the 1900s were originally interfaith, that is, marriages between two people from different religions. But afterward, only 10 percent of marriages remained interfaith, because in 15 percent of the marriages one or another or both of the partners changed religions, so they ended up in the same religion, and the bottom line represents marriages that remained interfaith. No matter how you measure it, interfaith marriages have become substantially more common over the decades.

Northern Ireland has had deep religious cleavages and correspondingly low interfaith-marriage rates. America in the early 1900s looked a

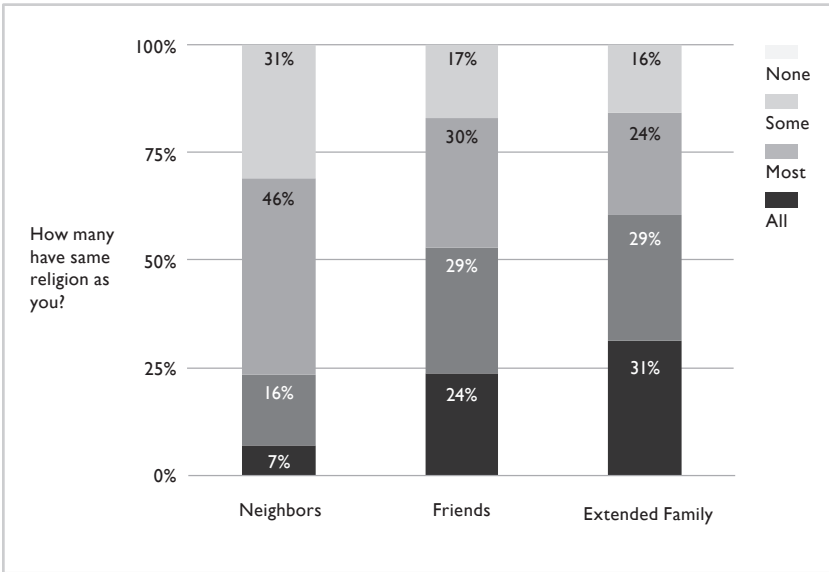


FIGURE 19. Few Americans have religiously homogeneous families, friends, and neighbors.

lot like Northern Ireland in terms of intermarriage. But we have changed tremendously. This means that most Americans who are getting married now have in-laws who are in some other religion and aunts and uncles in other religions.

Moreover, even if you do not change your religion at all and you start in a religiously homogeneous environment in terms of religion—you are a Methodist, and everybody you know is a Methodist, and you are married to a Methodist—over the course of your life, about a third of them are going to stop being Methodists and switch to something else. So even if you stay put, your family and friends are changing, and you end up with a more diverse set of friends and relatives.

Figure 19 shows how religiously homogeneous various sectors of our lives are today. The dark band at the bottom represents the people who live in religiously homogeneous settings. For example, 7 percent of all Americans say that all of their neighbors are of the same religion as them. But actually, many more say that none of their neighbors are of their religion, so they are living in a very diverse environment. Only about one-quarter of Americans say that their five closest friends are all of the same religion as they are. We asked people to tell us about the five people that they would go to if they had some serious personal problem, like they

learned that they had cancer or their marriage was falling apart. And then we asked what religion each of them was, and for the average American, half of their “go-to” friends are in some other religion. And finally, as you can see, only a third of Americans live in a completely homogeneous extended family.

When you add up all these numbers, it turns out that almost all of us love someone who is in a different religion, and it is very hard to demonize someone we love. Almost everyone has an Aunt Susan. Aunt Susan is in a different religious tradition from you. You are Quaker; Aunt Susan is Jewish. Or you are Jewish and Aunt Susan is Baptist. Or you are Baptist and Aunt Susan is Catholic. Or you are Catholic and Aunt Susan is none of the above. Your faith tells you that poor Aunt Susan is not going to make it to heaven because she prays at the wrong altar. But all of us know Aunt Susan, and for sure, Aunt Susan is made for heaven. If anybody is going to get to heaven, it is Aunt Susan. She is a saintlike person, the one who brings chicken soup and remembers birthdays and volunteers at the nursing home. And so all of us in America, even the most religious of us, are caught between (on the one hand) what our faith formally tells us, what our pastors would tell us if we asked, which is “Sadly those people are not going to be saved,” and (on the other hand) Aunt Susan. And Aunt Susan almost always wins that battle. By the way, Aunt Susan just came out of the closet. Exactly the same story applies to Americans’ attitudes toward homosexuals. It is not that we went out looking for homosexual friends. We had friends that we liked and then it turned out they were gay, and we thought, gosh, if he or she is gay, maybe gays are not so bad.

Or take, for example, your pal Al. You’re both beekeepers. You don’t know what Al’s religion is; you just both enjoy beekeeping. And then one day you are out doing whatever beekeepers do, and you learn that Al is a Mormon. You didn’t go looking for a Mormon friend, but it turns out you have one. How do you reconcile that with your previous skepticism about Mormonism?

We can watch what happens because we interviewed people twice. We can see that the people who got new Mormon friends (or new evangelical friends or new Jewish friends or whatever) did not begin by being pro-Mormon, but after they get their new friends, they become pro-Mormon. You might think that that is not so surprising. But our data suggest that when you meet someone of a different religion, when someone from a different religion enters your five-closest-friends network, you

become more tolerant toward all religions, not just that one new religion, so there is a spillover effect.

The “pal Al” effect, of course, depends upon your encountering one of those people. What is characteristic of those three groups at the bottom, the Mormons, the Buddhists, and the Muslims, is that there are not many of them, and they are found in very concentrated geographical settings. There are about as many Mormons as there are Jews in America, but a very large fraction of all Mormons live in Utah. So if you are in Utah, you have a good chance of encountering a Mormon and making up your mind about Mormonism. But if you live in Florida, you are much less likely to discover your beekeeper friend is Mormon than you are to discover that he is Jewish, or evangelical. This same principle explains why one group of devout Christians is *not* unusually hostile toward Muslims, namely, Black Protestants. The presence of Black Muslims in that community means that unlike white Christians, many black Christians actually have a pal Ali.

So the answer to the question “How can we—almost uniquely among nations—be devout, diverse, and tolerant?” is Aunt Susan and my pal Al.

LECTURE II.
RELIGIOUS AMERICANS ARE BETTER NEIGHBORS
AND CITIZENS, THOUGH LESS TOLERANT. WHY?

My previous essay described how America has become more polarized religiously over the past half century—how we have become either very religious or very secular and how that religious difference has become interlinked with our politics. Yet despite the fact that we are a devout nation and a diverse and increasingly polarized nation in religious terms, tolerance is higher than ever across religious lines—including the line between religion and no religion at all—because we’ve built ever-denser personal networks that cross those lines.

Tonight I am going to talk about a different question, using the same data and the same theoretical perspective, and that is to what extent religion contributes to or detracts from the quality of democracy in communities all across the United States. I am going to claim that religious Americans are mostly better neighbors and citizens and even happier than nonreligious Americans. Having presented evidence in support of that claim, I will turn to ask why that is so.

Does religion contribute to democratic vitality in America, and if so, how does it do that? There’s good news and bad news, and I will begin with the bad news. The first thing to say is that religious Americans are not in all respects ideal democratic citizens. We find in our study—as many other researchers in this country and abroad have found since this topic was first examined in the 1950s—that, on average, religious people are less tolerant of dissent than nonreligious people.

A preliminary word about methodology: Throughout this essay, I present evidence comparing highly religious and less religious Americans. In every case David Campbell, my coauthor, and I have confirmed that the differences are highly robust and are not caused by the spurious influence of extraneous variables. For example, education is a strong predictor of tolerance of dissent, so in all our analysis of the relationship between religiosity and tolerance, we have controlled statistically for education. To simplify this presentation, however, I leave that multivariate analysis out here, though it is described in detail in the book from which these lectures are drawn.¹

1. This lecture, like the previous one, is closely drawn from Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York:

Our measure of religiosity is a composite of six separate questions that we asked people in order to discover how religious they were. We asked them how often they went to religious services, how often they prayed, and how strongly they believed in God, or if they did indeed believe in God at all. We also asked them how important religion was to their sense of identity, how important it was in their daily lives, and how strongly committed they were to their particular religious tradition. No one of those questions alone is a perfect measure of religiosity, though they are highly correlated with one another, so we combined them all into a single measure. As a matter of fact, religiosity is such a powerful feature of our lives that it would not make any difference at all to anything I am going to say if we used any single measure of religiosity. Some of us are religious in all those ways, and some of us are secular in all those ways.

So what's the evidence that religious people are less tolerant of dissent? In our 2006 survey we asked, "Do you think that people have a perfect right to give a speech defending Osama bin Laden or al-Qaeda?" Surprisingly, despite 9/11 most Americans insisted that people have the right to defend Osama bin Laden or al-Qaeda. You can see in figure 1 that 65 percent of the most secular Americans agree with this statement. The intensity of support for free speech declines somewhat to roughly 50 percent as religiosity increases, although it rises a bit among the most religious group of Americans. We have done the same survey in the UK, and as figure 1 shows, a much higher fraction of Americans say yes than British people do to the same question. In fact, even the most religious American is a firmer defender of free speech than the most secular Briton, though he or she is likely to be slightly less firm in that defense than the most secular American.

Other evidence, too, illustrates that religious people are less tolerant. Some useful data about trends over time come from the General Social Survey, which has asked Americans regularly since the early 1970s their views on civil liberties and free speech. Figure 2 shows people's views on whether a homosexual should be allowed to teach, to give a public lecture, or to have a book in the local library. The twin lines trace rising support for the civil liberties of homosexuals among both religious people and nonreligious people. The convergence between the two lines reflects the fact that the increase in toleration for homosexuals has actually been

Simon & Schuster, 2010), released simultaneously with the original delivery of the lectures. I thank Simon & Schuster for their agreement with this arrangement.

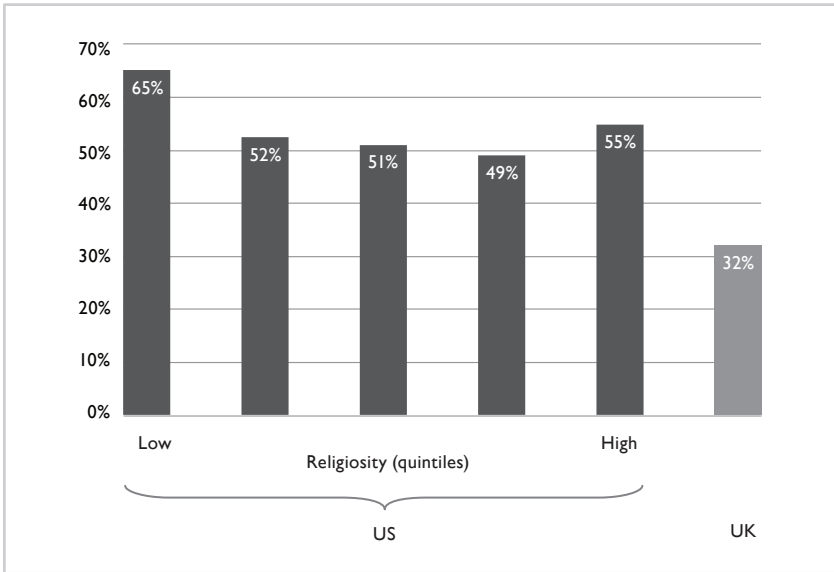


FIGURE 1. “People have a perfect right to give a speech defending Osama bin Laden or al-Qaeda” (agree).

slightly faster among religious people than among secular people, because at the beginning, religious people were so much less tolerant. By 2008 84 percent of all secular people—people who rarely attend church—said that homosexuals should be allowed to give lectures, write books, and teach. The comparable figure among religious people was about 71 percent. Admittedly, these questions pose a somewhat tougher test for support for civil liberties among religious people since many of them believe that homosexuality itself is morally objectionable. On the other hand, from a civil libertarian point of view, people should be allowed to express their views. Thus, like the question about bin Laden, this evidence suggests that religious people are still roughly ten to fifteen percentage points less tolerant, even though the gap has narrowed in recent years.

We can explore that growth in open-mindedness among religious people by examining generational differences. Figure 3 shows how religious people differ in tolerance according to when they came of age. Again, the topic is an especially tough test of toleration for religious people, for the figure shows the views of churchgoers on whether “someone against religion” should be allowed to teach, to give a public lecture, or to have a book in the local library. They are asked, in short, how they feel about free speech for people who, by definition, disagree with them.

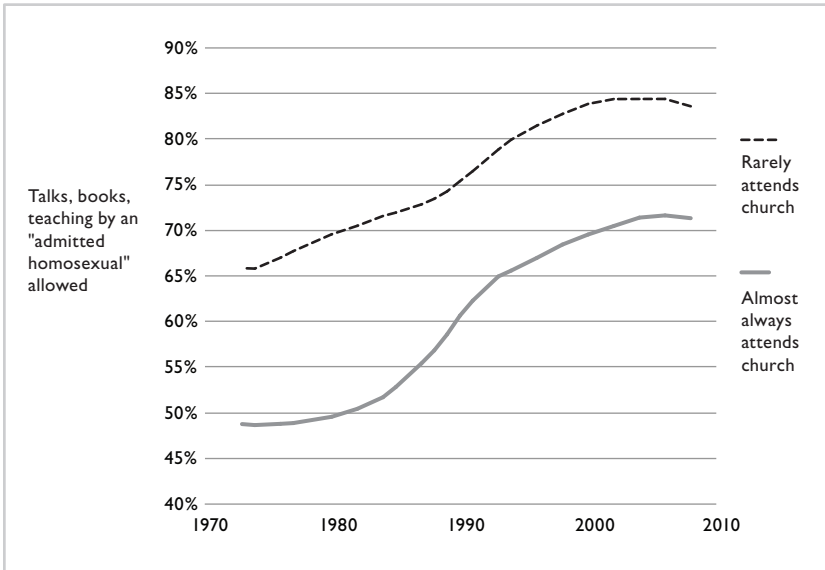


FIGURE 2. Support for civil liberties of homosexuals, by frequency of church attendance.

To illustrate generational differences, we show the data separately for four different generational cohorts.

Of churchgoers who came of age before 1945, only about 35–40 percent agreed that someone against religion should be allowed to give lectures, write books, or teach. So only a minority of religious people in the first half of the century were tolerant in that sense. Churchgoers who came of age between 1945 and 1965 were substantially more tolerant in that sense, for 55–60 percent of them said that people should be allowed to lecture, teach, and write books against religion. The top line represents churchgoers who came of age between 1966 and 1985—basically the boomer generation. They are substantially more tolerant of dissent than their churchgoing elders, though still less tolerant than secular people of their own generation. The intergenerational shift toward greater tolerance among religious people seems then to have stalled with Generation X and the millennials, represented by the dotted line just below the boomer generation. This youngest generation of religious people is not much more tolerant than the preceding generation, though they are much more tolerant than their churchgoing grandparents had been. In short, the rise in tolerance for dissent among religious Americans—even for antireligious views—has been driven by generational arithmetic, as a

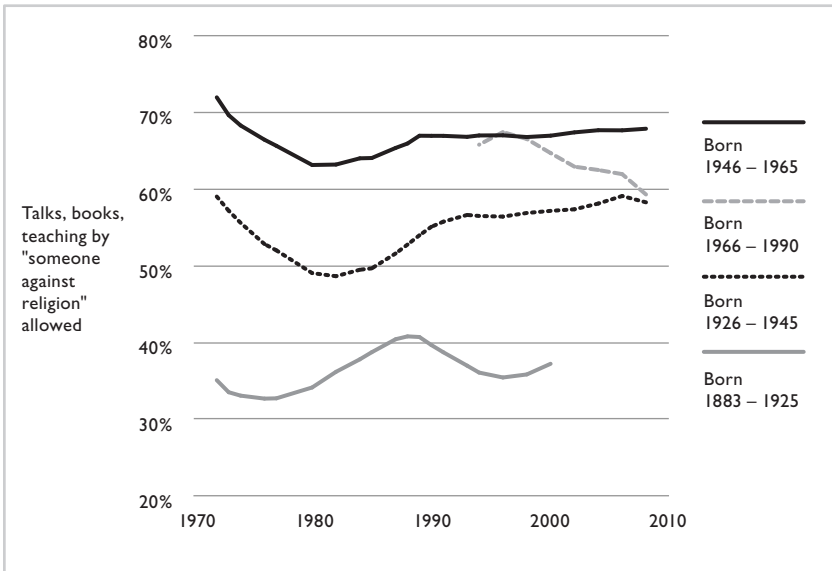


FIGURE 3. Among regular churchgoers younger generations are more tolerant of antireligious expression than older generations.

generation of churchgoers among whom such tolerance was expressed by roughly one in three was replaced by generations in which such tolerance was expressed by roughly two in three.

The bottom line, by our measures and by most people's measures, is that religious people are less tolerant of dissent. Although they have been closing that gap slowly but steadily over the past half century, a significant gap remains. That is bad news from the point of view of reconciling religion and liberal democracy. The rest of this essay will focus instead on good news—evidence that religious people are better neighbors and better citizens than nonreligious people.

As I noted earlier, I will focus here on differences between religious and nonreligious people, while holding constant (in the background) many other things that might get in the way of examining the effect of religion: age, gender, education, income, race, region, home ownership, length of residence, marital status, parental status, and political ideology. In effect, I will compare people who are matched on all these variables, but who differ in their level of religiosity, and I will ask whether and how that difference in religiosity is correlated with various indicators of neighborliness and good citizenship.

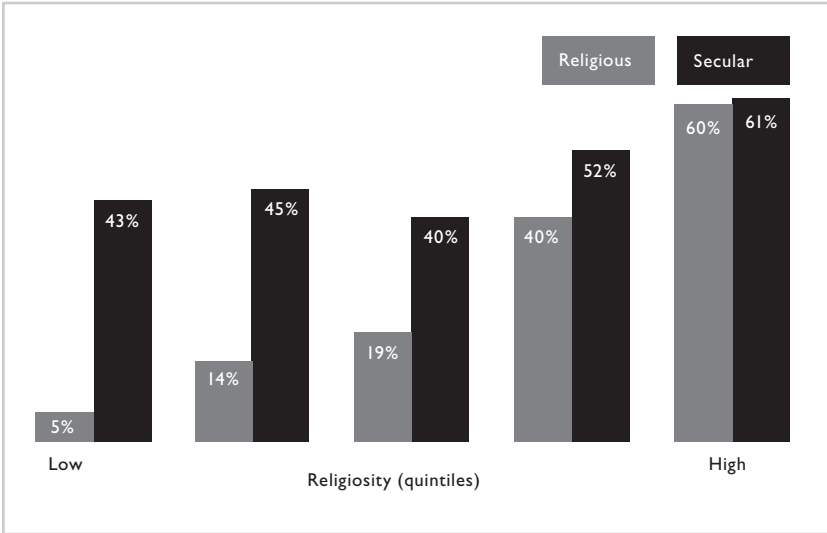


FIGURE 4. Religiosity predicts both secular and religious volunteering.

Figure 4 shows the relationship between religion and volunteering, distinguishing between religious and nonreligious volunteering. It is no surprise that volunteering for religious causes—for example, volunteering to be an usher on Sunday morning—is quite low among nonreligious people. (I actually wonder how even 5 percent of nonreligious people volunteer for religious causes. Maybe their churchgoing spouses pull them into volunteering.) At the other end of the spectrum, religious people are heavy volunteers for religious causes, whether they are singing in the church choir or volunteering in a church-run soup kitchen.

The more interesting fact is religious Americans are also much more likely to volunteer for secular causes. The reported rate of volunteering for secular causes—that is, coaching Little League, or working in a community soup kitchen—is roughly 40 percent among people at the nonreligious end of the spectrum and rises to more than 60 percent among religious people. Keep in mind that this is in addition to their ushering and choir singing.

What do people volunteer for? The left-hand column in figure 5 is people who attend church at least weekly; on the right are the people who rarely or never attend church. Fifty-one percent of those who attend church at least weekly say they volunteer for church causes, while only 4 percent of people who rarely or never attend church volunteer in a house

Domain of volunteering	Attend church at least weekly	Attend church rarely or never
Religious group or house of worship	51%	4%
Help poor or elderly	40%	15%
School or youth programs	36%	15%
Neighborhood or civic group	26%	13%
Health care or particular diseases	21%	13%
Arts or cultural organizations	9%	6%

FIGURE 5. Type of volunteering by religiosity (with standard demographic and ideological characteristics held constant).

of worship or in a religious setting. As I noted, this specific difference is hardly surprising, but let's take a look at volunteering for secular causes.

Next is volunteering to help the poor or needy. Forty percent of all regular churchgoers say they volunteered in the past year to help the poor or elderly, while only 15 percent of people who do not go to church say the same. Thirty-six percent of regular churchgoers volunteer with school or youth programs as compared to 15 percent of nonchurchgoers. Twenty-six percent of regular churchgoers have volunteered with a civic or neighborhood group, as opposed to 13 percent of nonchurchgoers. Twenty-one percent of regular churchgoers have worked on health care or some particular disease—that means they volunteer for a blood drive, or to help AIDS victims, or the American Heart Association campaign, or whatever—as compared to 13 percent of nonchurchgoers. The only domain where there is not a big difference between religious and nonreligious people is working with an arts group, such as serving as a museum docent. Nine percent of church people have volunteered for arts or cultural organizations as opposed to 6 percent of nonreligious people.

Keep in mind that all these figures have been adjusted so that these two columns have the same demographic composition. That is, the differences here are not attributable to education, income, age, and all those other factors. A short way of summarizing this chart is that in all the domains of volunteering regarding the needy—that is, helping the poor, elderly, or youth, or neighborhoods, or people with illnesses—religious people are two or three times more likely to volunteer than are nonreligious people.

Data from the General Social Survey show that (again controlling for other factors) religious people are more likely to give blood, to return excess change to a clerk, to give money to panhandlers, to spend time with someone who is “a bit down,” and even to let a stranger cut in front

of them in line. In short, it is not just in formal settings, but also in “informal altruism” that religious people are significantly more likely to step forward.

Religious people are more likely not just to volunteer their time but also to give money. They are more likely to give away a higher fraction of their annual income, and not only to religious causes. It is not so surprising that religious people are more likely to put money in the offering plate at church, but they are also a little more likely to give to secular causes like the United Way. Once again, even though they are devoting a lot of their resources to religious causes, something about being religious has so boosted their generosity that, in addition, they give more than secular people to secular causes.

They are also much more involved in their community, as the six graphs of figure 6 illustrate. Figure 6A shows answers to a question about how many civic groups these people belong to, such as Rotary, parent-teacher associations, neighborhood groups, and so on. How involved are they in local civic activity? The particular measure here is how many of them belong to three or more groups. These are heavy-duty joiners. As you can see, of people who are not religious, 18 percent are heavy-duty joiners. By comparison, 36 percent of the most religious people are heavy-duty joiners. These are not religious groups, but secular groups that they are more involved in.

Not only are religious people more likely to be joiners, but they are also more likely to be civic leaders—for example, to be an officer or a committee member of some organization (figure 6B). Fourteen percent of the least-religious people have in the past year had some kind of leadership role in local civic activities as compared to 29 percent of the most religious. About twice as many of the most religious Americans are civic leaders.

The next test of civic engagement does not require week-in and week-out involvement in the community. We asked people, “Have you in the course of the last twelve months been to any public meeting where people talked about town affairs or school affairs?” (figure 6C). Thirty-eight percent of the least-religious Americans had been to some public meeting in the previous twelve months as compared to 57 percent of religious people.

We also explored reformist activism, asking, “Did any of the groups that you are involved with take any local action for social or political reform in the last twelve months?” (figure 6D). These are the civic progressive do-gooders of America. Again, 11 percent of the least-religious

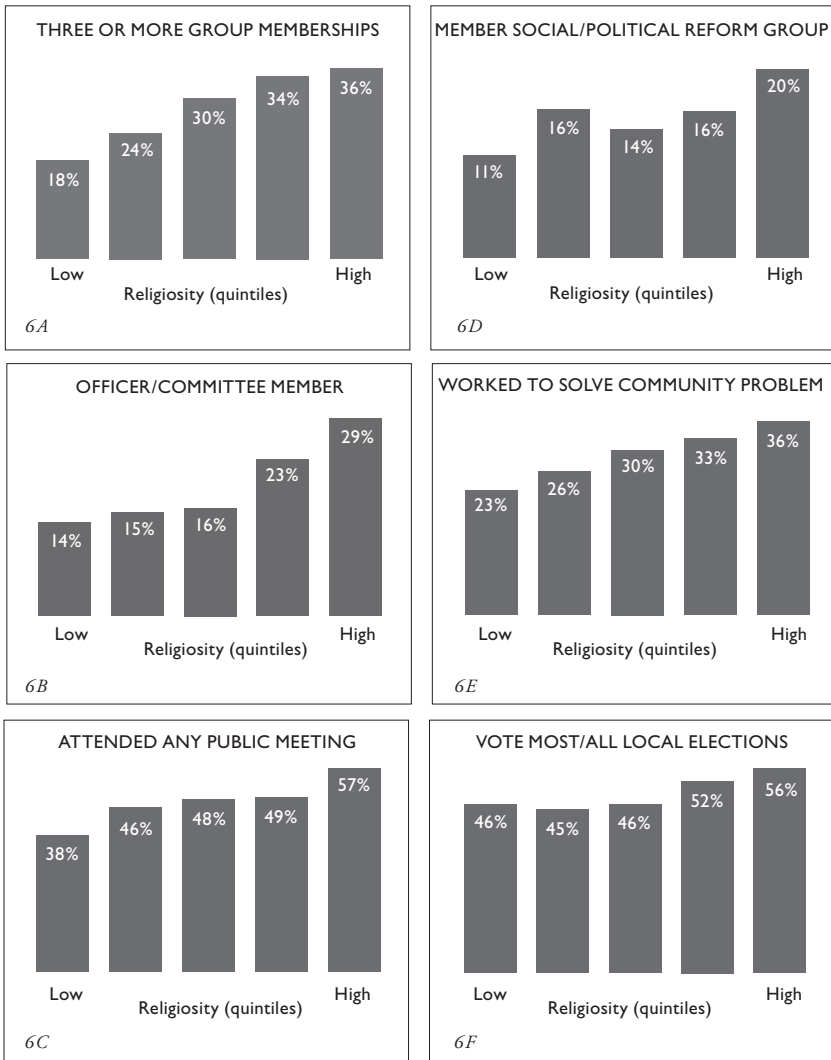


FIGURE 6. Civic engagement and religiosity (with standard demographic and ideological characteristics held constant).

Americans have been active in some local reform group as compared to almost twice that number among religious Americans. In other words, civic activism among religious Americans is by no means concentrated on abortion protests or other conservative causes.

I am not saying that secular people do not favor social reform. Obviously, many secular Americans are reformists in spirit, but our evidence suggests that often they simply don't show up, when, as Woody Allen said,

about 80 percent of life is simply showing up. In fact, the “religious edge” in civic involvement is even greater among political liberals than among political conservatives. To be sure, as we learned in the previous essay, liberals in the pews are rarer nowadays, but those few are working harder than their secular ideological soul mates to pursue progressive goals.

We also asked, “Have you worked with someone or some group to solve a problem in the community where you live in the past twelve months?” (figure 6E). (We let our respondents decide what counts as a community problem.) Twenty-three percent of secular Americans say they worked to solve some community problem in the past twelve months as opposed to 36 percent of the most religious Americans.

Not surprisingly, religious people are also more actively involved in partisan and electoral politics, but strikingly the religious edge in partisan participation is less than the religious edge in nonpartisan activities, like belonging to civic groups, leading those groups, going to public meetings, cooperating to solve a community problem, and so on. Figure 6F shows that 56 percent of the most religious Americans say that they vote in most or all local elections, as compared to 46 percent of the most secular Americans. This is a statistically significant difference, but it is nothing like the two- or three-to-one ratio in participation rates that we saw on nonpartisan civic activities.

How trustworthy are religious people? We have no direct measure of trustworthiness, but I can report what Americans say in response to that question. Figure 7 shows what Americans think about the relative honesty of religious and nonreligious people. On the far right is the tenth of the American people that are the most religious, whereas at the far left is the most secular tenth among us. The two lines represent the level of trust toward “deeply religious people” and “nonreligious people.” You will not be surprised to discover that religious people think religious people are trustworthy. They are less sure about the trustworthiness of nonreligious people. At the other end of the graph, the most deeply secular Americans are slightly more trusting of other nonreligious people than they are of deeply religious Americans.

But the most interesting feature is the relative ranking of deeply religious and nonreligious people at different points across the spectrum of religiosity. The 20 percent least-religious Americans give the edge in honesty to nonreligious Americans, while the 60 percent most religious Americans are more trusting of deeply religious Americans. The median American—by definition, at the fiftieth percentile of religiosity—gives a

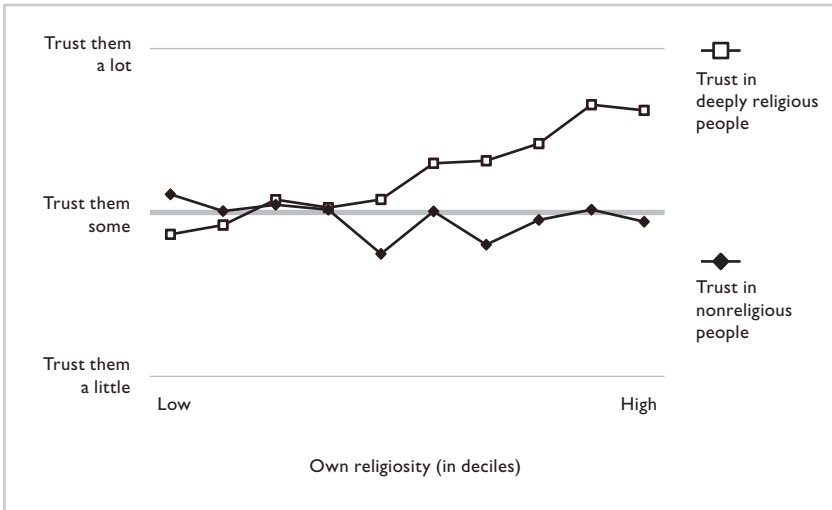


FIGURE 7. Most Americans trust religious people more than nonreligious people.

significant edge in trustworthiness to deeply religious people. We do not have any independent measure of how trustworthy religious people are, but the average American—even the average American who is not herself all that religious—trusts religious people significantly more than she trusts secular people.

To sum up what we have said so far: Religious people are a little less tolerant of dissent and supportive of civil liberties, especially for people who disagree with them, than secular Americans. This is not a huge difference, but it is a significant and robust finding. On the other hand, religious people are a lot more likely to do all of the other things that we want of good citizens. They are more likely to volunteer to help people, especially the needy. They are more likely to give to charity. They are more likely to take part in essentially all forms of civic activity. Religion itself seems to be strongly correlated with doing good. I should add that these are findings from our own surveys, but we have looked exhaustively at about a half-dozen other big national surveys as well, and in all respects they confirm that religious people are more likely to be better neighbors, better citizens, and more generous than nonreligious people.

Why is that? Why are religious people so much more involved? The first thought that occurred to me was that it had something to do with the denomination that people were in. Maybe people in some faiths, but not others, were led by their faith to be generous, outgoing, and civically

involved. In fact, it turns out that religious tradition does not matter at all. Once you have controlled for how religious people are, there is nothing left to be explained by which religious denomination they belong to.

Indeed, the relationship between church attendance or religious attendance and all these other measures of generosity and involvement is identical across all religions. Technically, what I am saying is there is no interaction effect here. What that means is that it is not which religion you are in; it is how religious you are. So strong is this effect that even people who say they have no religion at all, but who might go to church functions because their spouse is religious, are more generous. There is something about going to church, even if you are not a member of the church, that makes you more generous, civically involved, and so on.

Nor is it the content of their religion. It is not their political ideology. Indeed, when you control for religiosity, liberals are actually more generous. It is not their theological beliefs. This was a startling finding. Once you control frequency of church attendance, there is no additional impact of how strongly you believe in God, or even whether you do not believe in God at all. If you go to church a lot (perhaps to accompany your spouse) but are an unbeliever, you are a better citizen in terms of these other measures than someone who passionately believes in God but never goes to church.

It is not belief in God that is driving this pattern, nor hope of heaven or fear of hell. It turns out that people who are confident there is a heaven are not any nicer than people who are not sure at all there is a heaven. You might think it was because of fear of the devil, but people who believe in hell are no nicer—I am using “nicer” as a shorthand for all those things—than people who do not believe in hell. We asked roughly half a dozen questions about how personally important religion was, trying to tap the psychological importance of religion, but these too had zero effect once we control for church attendance. It does not matter how often you read the Bible or read scripture, or how often you pray.

One of the questions was “How important is avoiding sin in your everyday life decisions?” People who are constantly in fear of sin are no better or worse in their civic activity than people who do not worry about that at all. The same thing is true for the Second Coming. People who think the end of the world is coming tomorrow are not any nicer than people who think it may never come. None of these theological convictions makes the slightest difference to how nice people are, once we control for whether they go to church.

Imagine two people who are in most respects identical: same gender, same region of the country, same age, same length of residence, and so forth. One of them goes to church but is not religious in any other way—does not believe in heaven, does not believe in hell, does not believe in the Second Coming, never reads the Bible, never prays, and so on. She simply goes to church. The other person is exceptionally devout. She prays all the time. Religion is the most important thing in her life. She does think the Second Coming is on its way. She firmly believes in heaven and hell. She simply does not go to church. She is devout, but devout alone. That person is not any nicer, statistically speaking, than a secular person. She is certainly not so nice as the person who does not believe any of it but goes to church.

You might think, however, that all those sermons about the Golden Rule have convinced religious people to “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Maybe religious people, having heard it all their lives, have internalized that and are more altruistic in their norms. In fact, this hypothesis seems to be empirically true. The left half of figure 8 refers to people who agree that “these days people need to look after themselves and not worry overly about others.” In effect, they say it is fine to look out for number one. Fully 48 percent of the least-religious Americans say that, but only 26 percent of the most religious Americans agree. At least in terms of their expressed values, religious people are a little more altruistic.

The right half of figure 8 is based on a question commonly used in psychology as a measure of empathy, or the ability to put oneself in others’ shoes. The question specifically is “I am always quite touched by things that I see happen.” Only 20 percent of nonreligious people are empathetic in that sense, compared to 32 percent of religious people who are empathetic in that sense. In short, on standard psychological measures of empathy and altruistic values, religious people rate significantly higher. In turn, people who have those values (whether or not they go to church) act in more altruistic ways. This difference in altruism probably explains between 10 percent and 25 percent of the difference in “niceness.” Altruism in that sense does predict volunteering, but it does not predict civic engagement. In the big picture, religiously based altruism and empathy are part of the story, but only a small part.

A much bigger part of the story—indeed, the crucial part of the explanation—is involvement in religiously based social networks. Figure 9 shows the same kind of graph I displayed earlier (figure 6). It includes

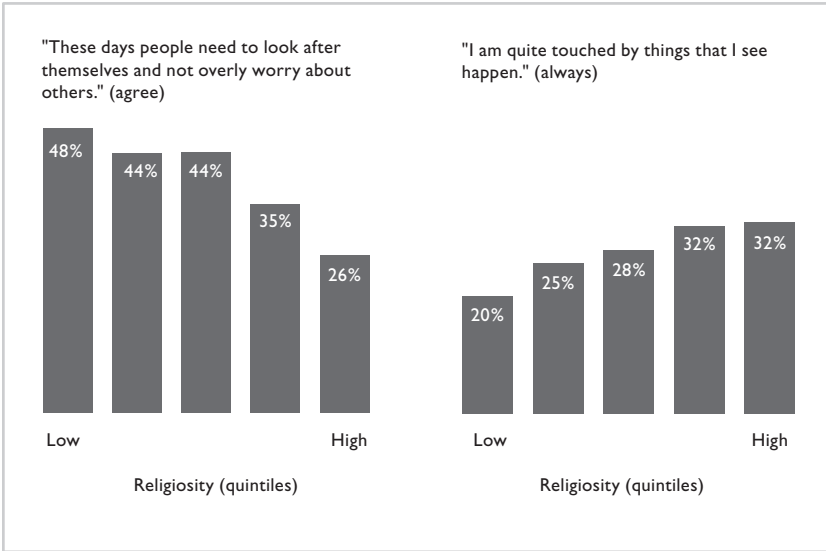


FIGURE 8. The golden rule is a [small] part of the story.

six different measures of neighborliness and good citizenship. Instead of church attendance, however, we now ask how a person's "niceness" in this sense is related to his involvement in religious social networks. As you can see, involvement in religious social networks is a powerful predictor of each of these six measures of civic involvement. (Our index of involvement in religious social networks is based on three specific questions. One key measure is "How many close friends do you have in your congregation?" supplemented by questions about the frequency with which you discuss religion with your family and friends and your involvement in small groups in your congregation.) In each of these graphs, the people at the right-hand side have many friends at church, discuss religion at least weekly with family and friends, and belong to one or more prayer groups or Bible-study groups or the like. At the other end are people who have no friends at church, either because they actually do not belong to any church,² or else because although they do belong to a congregation, they sit and pray alone. They do not go to church suppers, they do not go to prayer groups, and they have no friends at church. We use the shorthand label "church friends" to refer to that measure of integration in your religious community.

2. About one in five Americans say they have no connection with any congregation.

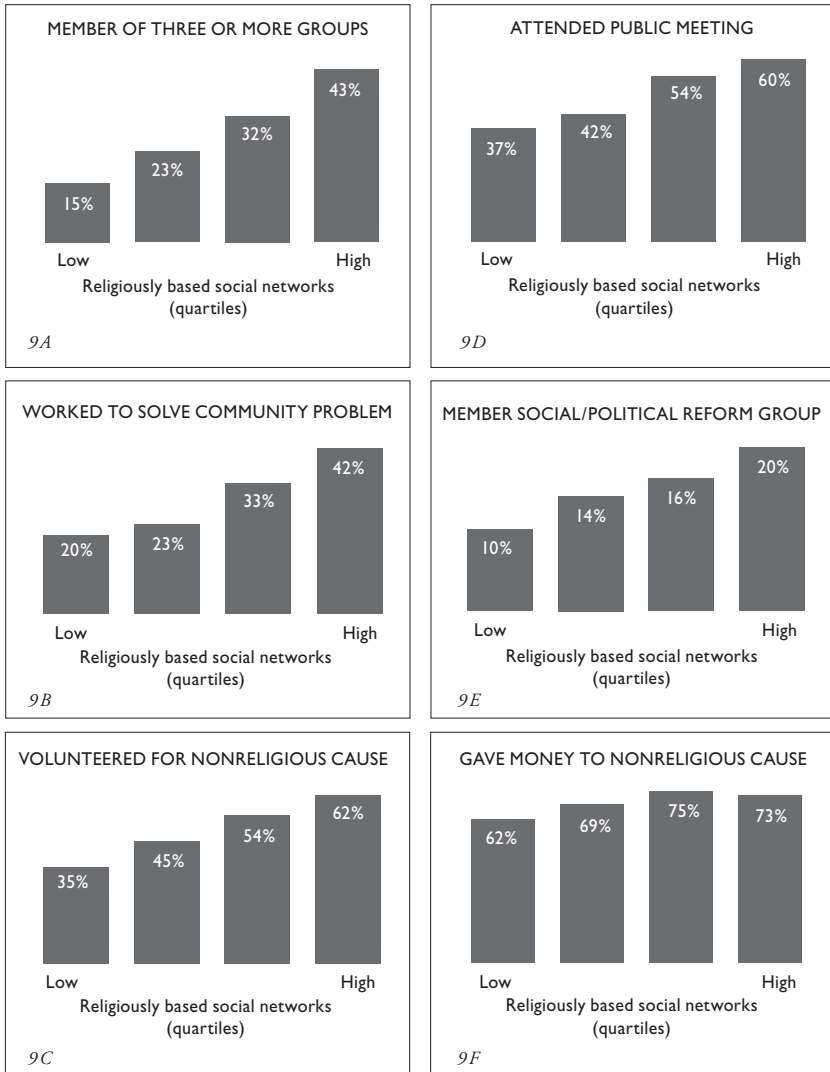


FIGURE 9. Religiously based social networks foster civic engagement (with standard demographic and ideological characteristics **and church attendance and sociability** held constant).

As figure 9A shows, 43 percent of those Americans who have many friends at church are civic joiners, as compared to 15 percent of people who do not have many friends at church. Of the people who have a lot of church friends, 42 percent have worked on a community project in the past year, as compared to 20 percent of the people who do not have

any church friends (9B). The same thing is true for volunteering (9C), for attending public meetings (9D), for being members of reform groups (9E), and for giving money to nonreligious causes (9F). Of the people who have a lot of friends at church, 73 percent have given money to some secular cause like the United Way. Only 62 percent of people who do not have any church friends are generous in that sense. The same pattern applies to all our many other measures of neighborliness and civic engagement. Once we take into account the number of church friends someone has, virtually nothing else about their religious beliefs and behavior—even church attendance itself—matters for their democratic citizenship.

In short, we tried to discover what the “secret ingredient” in religiosity was, in terms of its effect on neighborliness and good citizenship. Why are people who attend church much more likely to be civically engaged? We found that the secret ingredient is church friends—or, more formally, involvement in religious-based social networks. The more church friends you have, the nicer you are. Getting to know one more person in your congregation increases your odds of doing all these good things a lot. The core message of this talk is that church friends are supercharged friends. They are incredibly effective in increasing your democratic virtues.

To be sure, people who have a lot of church friends also tend to have more friends in general, so you might suspect that this finding simply reflects the fact that more sociable people do all these things. But we have controlled for how many friends you have in general, so it is not just sociability. We have controlled for how many organizations you belong to, and it is not just being a joiner. Another way to put it is that in terms of civic virtue, having church friends is not just the sum of being religious and having friends. Being religious and having friends does not have much effect on your good citizenship, while having more church friends doubles or triples the likelihood that you will be involved in your community, volunteering, and so on.

Our study even allows us to be a bit more confident that in this case, correlation does, in fact, reflect causation. Because we interviewed our respondents twice, in 2006 and then again in 2007, we can watch people get or lose church friends. We talked to Joe last year, and he had two church friends. We came back to him this year, and now he has three or four church friends. We know how generous and civically engaged Joe was last year, so we control for how generous and active he was last year and how many friends he had last year. We also control for how many

friends he has in general, how much involvement, and so on. In short, net of all the other factors that might affect Joe's niceness, we can watch what happens to Joe when he simply gains a few more church friends. The answer: he gets nicer.

Strictly speaking, that does not prove causality beyond a reasonable doubt. I have not shown proof that church friends cause you to be nicer, but I have ruled out some possible explanations. It cannot be that the correlation is driven by some enduring personal trait, such as a "niceness gene," so that if you have this gene, you go to church more and you are also nicer. Any individual trait that is invariant across time, like genes, cannot explain what's going on here, because by definition, that trait could not have changed between 2006 and 2007. The same is true of any enduring personality trait, like sociability, in part because we have already controlled for how sociable Joe is in general. We have controlled for how many friends he has. We have controlled for essentially everything we can think of.

Here is the kind of thing that might have produced these results without there being some causal connection between church friends and niceness. Suppose that something else happened in Joe's life, like Joe got married. When Joe gets married, he gets more church friends and he also starts volunteering, because his wife gets him involved. The correlation between the additional church friends and the additional volunteering would be spurious, each caused by the same external factor, that is, Joe's marriage. In fact, we've ruled out that specific explanation, because we have controlled for whether Joe is married. Similarly, it can't be simply having children, because we have controlled for how many kids Joe has. It is not that Joe has been in town a year longer, so he has acquired more friends in church and has become more civically involved, because we have controlled for how long he has been in the town. So although we have not ruled out all potential factors that might make the correlation between church friends and niceness spurious, we have ruled out all those that we can think of.

Let's turn briefly to a separate but related topic. There is a large literature internationally and in many disciplines on "happiness," or life satisfaction. In this literature, there are many standard findings, such as the fact that money can buy you happiness, but not much. Rich people are a little happier than poor people, but one central finding in happiness studies is the importance of social connections. Getting married is really good

for your happiness or life-satisfaction level. Getting married is the rough equivalent of quadrupling your annual income.

One of the most common findings in this research is that religious people are happier than nonreligious people. The explanation for this finding turns out to be exactly the same story that I have just told you. How religious you are matters much more for your happiness than which religion you are in. If you are more religious, you are happier than if you are not. Theology is completely irrelevant. Believing in God or not believing in God, for example, does not have any effect on how happy you are.

And what is it about religion that increases people's life satisfaction and happiness? It is church friends. It is exactly the same story and exactly the same kind of analysis that we have presented here. We talked to Joe. We found out that he got one more church friend, and not only is he more involved in the community, but he is happier. He is significantly statistically happier. To summarize, religious people are both happier and better citizens, but not because of theology. It is not even because of church membership per se, but because they are embedded in religious networks. It was astonishing to us to discover that exactly the same models statistically fit for happiness as for good citizenship.

We are doing this study in the UK, and it turns out that the same thing is true there. This is surprising, because the level of religiosity in Britain is much lower than in America. Many fewer people attend church and so on. The effects of being religious in Britain are, however, exactly the same as the effects of being religious in America. That is, more civic involvement, more volunteering, more philanthropy, higher life satisfaction.

Finally, we come to the last question: what is so special about church friends? It is not just that they are all like you. It is not that if you have a lot of church friends, you are living in a hermetically sealed community, and you see only people of your faith. In fact, having a religiously homogeneous set of friends—only knowing Catholics, only knowing Mormons—makes you unhappier and less engaged. It is not that having church friends means you are living a very parochial life. Many of these people are not. They have other friends, too, but they have a lot of friends at church.

Here are some possible answers. Maybe it is because we see church friends regularly in a way we do not see other friends. We see them all the time, and therefore if church friends ask us to do something and we know we are going to see them next Sunday at church, we are more likely to do

it. The argument against that hypothesis is that friends you have at work have nothing like the same effect. There is almost no effect of having more friends at work on your niceness or happiness, so the underlying explanation probably is not how often you see your church friends.

Another possible explanation is what is sometimes called “competitive emulation.” That is, if you are in a bowling league, you get status by knocking down a lot of pins. You do not get status in a bowling league from being nice. Maybe in a religious group you get status from being nice, so the people in a religious group go out of their way to be nicer. Maybe there is an implicit competition to be the nicest person in your church group, and that drives up the average level of niceness and happiness.

Or here’s another possibility: maybe the crucial factor is being in a shared moral community. Maybe when someone in your church fellowship group asks you to volunteer, or go to a meeting, it is different from a similar request from somebody that you know from the gym. I work out at a gym in Cambridge, and there are people who jog at the same time I do. If one of them asked me to go to a Red Sox game, it seems appropriate and I would probably go. If one of them asked me instead to contribute to the Jimmy Fund, a Red Sox–related philanthropy, it probably is not quite as powerful as somebody in my church or my synagogue asking me to do the same thing. It somehow seems more appropriate for church friends to ask you to do nice things.

Or maybe it is because you share deeply emotional experiences—life, death, birth, marriage—with church friends. Maybe there is something emotionally different about a church friend from a nonchurch friend.

We did not begin this study recognizing the power of church friends, and therefore there is a lot we do not know about church friends. We and other researchers now need to probe that question more fully. In the meantime, here is the simple summary of our core finding. My previous book *Bowling Alone* said bowling in leagues is better than bowling alone. You are happier, you live longer, and your community is better off. This new study says *church* bowling leagues—that’s where the real action is!