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RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN
CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

David E. Campbell*

INTRODUCTION

The role of religion in American society presents a puzzle. This puzzle receives far less attention than it should—indeed, most Americans probably give it no thought. But when we compare the contemporary United States either to other periods in this country’s history or to other societies today, the puzzle appears in stark relief. Somehow, American society manages to blend three religious characteristics together: religiously devout, religiously diverse, and religiously tolerant.

The puzzle of how contemporary American society fuses devotion, diversity, and tolerance comprises the central theme of American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us, which Robert Putnam and I published in 2010.¹ This Article begins by briefly summarizing the argument and evidence presented in American Grace. Next, I consider three potential challenges to religious tolerance that are currently unfolding in American society—the rising number of religiously unaffiliated Americans, Americans’ attitudes toward Islam, and the place of Mormonism within the American religious mosaic. As I explain, each one represents a challenge to the story of America as a religiously tolerant nation, and will continue to do so in the short-term. However, even though they may currently appear as exceptions to the “rule” of religious tolerance, there is good reason to expect that the unaffiliated, Muslims, and Mormons will eventually prove the rule after all (perhaps sooner than many think). Yet, lest one think that this is a story with an inevitably happy ending, this Article concludes by grappling with the long-term implications of religious tolerance. Does religious tolerance inevitably mean the end of “prophetic” religion? For any particular religion, is the price of acceptability a loss of religious vitality?

* Professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame and the founding director of the Rooney Center for the Study of American Democracy.

II. Devotion, Diversity, and Tolerance

In this Part, I lay out the evidence for our claim that America can accurately be described as religiously devout, diverse, and tolerant. Having entered our evidence into the record, I then make a case for how the three pieces of the puzzle fit together harmoniously.

The claim that America scores high on religious devotion generally meets with little controversy. No matter the indicator of religiosity, Americans score well above the citizens of most other advanced industrialized nations. For example, according to the World Values Survey, 36% of Americans report attending religious services once a week or more. That compares to 7% of French, 8% of Germans, 12% of Dutch, 14% of Australians, and 17% of Britons. At 25%, even Canada—a country that shares both a border and much of its culture with the United States—has a lower rate of weekly religious attendance.\(^2\) Granted, there is some debate over the accuracy of religious attendance measurements.\(^3\) But even if self-reports of attendance are inflated, I submit that it is still socially significant that nearly 40% of Americans think of themselves—or want to be perceived by others—as regular attendees of religious services. While we will see evidence that religion is on the decline in America, this ebb should be placed in the context of a flow that, historically, has kept religiosity relatively high. My point is simply that while we can debate the precision of how religiosity is measured and speculate about long-term trends for religion in American society, compared to its international peers, the United States today is a religious nation.

Americans are not only religiously devout, America is religiously diverse. "Diversity" can have different connotations; in this context, religious diversity simply means that the United States is home to a multiplicity of religions, such that no single religion or religious group has anywhere near a majority of the population. Because there are hundreds of different religious denominations, especially within Protestantism, social scientists studying religion typically group similar de-

\(^2\) The statistics come from my analysis of the latest wave of the World Values Survey, 2005-2008. World Values Survey, http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org (last visited June 7, 2013) (follow “Online Data Analysis” hyperlink; then follow “Begin Analysis” hyperlink; then select “WVS 2005-2008” hyperlink; then select countries to compare and follow “Confirm Selection” hyperlink; then select “Religion and Morale” section and follow “How often do you attend religious services” hyperlink; then select “Cross-tabs” tab).

nominations into a smaller set of religious families, or traditions. But even when we look at this smaller set of religious traditions—that is, groups of denominations—no single one constitutes a majority of the population. According to the 2011 Faith Matters survey, evangelical Protestants comprise the single largest religious tradition in America today, with 31% of the population. Thirty-one percent of the U.S. population is no doubt substantial, but it is not a majority. Roughly 22% of the U.S. population identifies as Catholic, about the same share as the last forty years. Rounding out the list of major religious traditions in America, the next largest group is the “nones”—people who do not identify with any religion. I discuss the nones in depth below, but for now I note that they have only emerged in large numbers over roughly the last twenty years and have continued growing in number. According to the 2011 Faith Matters survey, 19% of Americans say that they have no religion. More recently, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found roughly 20% of the U.S. to be nones. More Americans today report having no religion than identify with a mainline Protestant denomination (13%). Given that mainline Protestantism has historically been the de facto establishment religion in America, its loss of “market share” has been a stunning change in the religious landscape.

Rounding out the list of major religious traditions, there are the African-American Protestants (9%), who are considered a distinct religious tradition because of the historical legacy of racial segregation. Then there are the Jews (2%) and the Mormons (2%). Some readers may find it surprising that there are as many Mormons in America as Jews. Below, I will have more to say about the place of Mormons in American society, particularly given their recent media prominence in the wake of Mitt Romney’s presidential campaign.


5. PUTNAM & CAMPBELL, supra note 1, at 16-17. The seemingly steady state of the Catholic population masks a stunning demographic change, whereby Anglo Catholics have been leaving the Church in droves, only to be replaced by Latino Catholics. See id. at 265, 299.


7. PUTNAM & CAMPBELL, supra note 1, at 16-17.

There is also a long tail of other religious groups in America that, while small in terms of their proportion of the overall population, nonetheless have many thousands (or more) of adherents. Many of these groups are also growing, through both immigration and relatively high birth rates. A partial list includes Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, and Jains. In sum, no matter how we define, classify, and categorize the plethora of religions, there can be no doubt that America is a religiously diverse nation.

If we think about the nature of religion, we might expect a combination of devotion and diversity to be explosive, perhaps even leading to violence. Over the course of America’s past, religious diversity has indeed sparked conflict. Jews and Catholics of yesteryear faced persecution and mob violence just as Muslims and Sikhs do today. And Mormons, members of a religion born and raised in the United States, were once embroiled in violent confrontation and continue to face rhetorical opprobrium. Looking around the world, mixing religiosity with religious pluralism has often led to deeply divided societies—think Baghdad and Belfast. And yet, notwithstanding these precedents for societal turmoil, America has a remarkably high degree of religious tolerance.

I expect that little controversy accompanies the claims that Americans are, on average, religiously devout and that America, taken as a whole, is religiously diverse. The claim that Americans are religiously tolerant, however, is another matter. Is this not a nation where filmmakers make movie trailers offensive to Islam, pastors burn the Koran, and gunmen attack Sikh temples? It is; but it is better described as a nation where most people have no problem with members of other faiths and overwhelmingly believe that there are many roads to heaven. In the 2011 Faith Matters survey, Putnam and I asked a representative sample of Americans who had indicated a belief in God, “Can a good person not of your faith go to heaven, or attain salvation?”9 Overwhelmingly, they said yes, regardless of their own religious background. Eighty-nine percent of the Americans surveyed believe that people of other faiths can go to heaven. This includes 97% of Catholics, 93% of mainline Protestants, 82% of African-American Protestants, and even 81% of evangelical Protestants. To

test the limits of this all-inclusive heaven, Christian respondents were asked a follow-up specifying that this hypothetical good person is not a Christian. Among Catholics and mainline Protestants, the numbers barely budged, as 87% of the former and 73% of the latter said that even non-Christians were welcome in heaven. Among African-American and evangelical Protestants, the numbers dropped more, but a majority of both groups do not see Christianity as a prerequisite for heaven.10

This question is not the only witness we can call to the stand to testify on behalf of America’s religious tolerance. In our survey, we also asked whether religious diversity has been good for America. Again, an overwhelming percentage of Americans—no matter their religious background or intensity of religious commitment—say yes. Eighty-six percent of the most secular Americans see the virtue of religious diversity, compared to 74% of the most highly religious.11

Still, you might be skeptical of what this question really tells us. After all, “diversity” is a buzzword glowing with a positive sheen. As further evidence of Americans’ comfort with religions other than their own, consider that 80% of the population believe that “basic truths can be found in many religions,” compared to 7% who say that there is very little truth in any religion and 13% who believe that only one religion (presumably their own) is true.12

What, though, do these data actually mean? Do they actually reflect tolerance? I readily concede that, particularly for the theologically fraught question regarding who goes to heaven, there may be terms more appropriate than tolerance. Perhaps we should call it religious acceptance. Whatever label we put on it, these data speak to a powerful fact about Americans today. Most Americans, most of the time, are accepting of most other religions. There are important exceptions, as I will discuss, but those exceptions should not distract us from the relative state of religious harmony in America today.

What explains America’s unusual—arguably unique—ability to combine a high degree of religiosity, a stunning multiplicity of religions, and a general attitude of “live and let live?” The answer is your “Aunt Susan.” Your Aunt Susan is an archetype of that person in

10. Fifty-nine percent of African-American Protestants say a non-Christian can go to heaven, and 55% of evangelicals say the same. Note that the numbers reported here are slightly different from those found in American Grace, Putnam & Campbell, supra note 1, at 536, as these are from 2011 and the book reports data from 2007. Nonetheless, the differences between 2007 and 2011 are small.
11. Putnam & Campbell, supra note 1, at 520, 521 fig.15.1.
12. These numbers come from the author’s analysis of the 2011 Faith Matters survey.
your life who is the kindest, sweetest, most saintly person you know. You know that if there is a heaven, Aunt Susan will be there. Yet you also know that Aunt Susan worships at a different altar than you. According to the theology of your religion, Aunt Susan is not going to heaven; however, your personal experience says otherwise. When faced with the choice between their theology and their saintly Aunt Susan, most Americans side with Aunt Susan.

In our analysis, Putnam and I found that almost all Americans have an Aunt Susan in their lives. More technically, virtually all Americans have neighbors, close friends, and family members of other faiths. Perhaps the most telling evidence of religious intermingling lies in attitudes toward interfaith marriage, which have undergone a quiet revolution. Once controversial and even verboten in many circles, today marriages across religious lines have become nearly as common as marriages between spouses of the same faith. But what is the result of all of this interreligious mixing and matching? Perhaps not surprisingly, close relationships with people of other faiths correlate with a positive regard for people of other religions.

Our evidence goes beyond a mere correlation, though. Because the Faith Matters survey consists of repeated interviews with the same people, we can trace what happens when people become friends with those of other religions. When we published *American Grace*, Putnam and I could only report on changes in friendships over the relatively brief span of about a year (2006–2007). Following the publication of the book, we returned once more to the same respondents in 2011, five years after our initial interviews. Whether we examine changes in friendships over one year or five years, our conclusion remains the same. When people add a friend of another faith, they have a higher regard for that faith. Put another way, our data show that if you become friends with, for example, an evangelical Protestant, your attitude toward evangelicals becomes more positive. In addition to the archetype of Aunt Susan, *American Grace* also introduces your metaphorical “pal Al.” Al is a friend who, you discover, has a different religious background than yours. Just as Aunt Susan led you to expand your notion of who goes to heaven, your friendship with Al encourages you to think more favorably of everyone who shares his religious background.

13. See *Putnam & Campbell*, supra note 1, at 149–51.
14. Readers interested in the details of the econometric models upon which these statements are based can consult Appendix 2 of *American Grace*. See id. at 563–69.
15. See id.
The "pal Al" principle confirms the long-standing theory of social contact from social psychology. Under the right conditions, greater contact between people from different backgrounds diminishes prejudice. Theory aside, it probably confirms the way most people think the world works.

More intriguing, however, is our finding that an increase in the religious diversity of one's friendship network leads to a higher regard for other religions not represented within the network. If you begin to think more favorably of Al's religion, then perhaps other religions are not so bad either. In other words, become friends with an evangelical and you will feel better about Mormons. Furthermore, we find that having a more religiously diverse group of friends leads people to agree that to be a good American one does not have to believe in God. I return to this finding below, as we see that it is significant for what it portends given the rising number of Americans who disclaim a religious affiliation.

To sum up the argument of American Grace, Americans experience religious comity because they have formed a web of interlocking social relationships across religious lines. Amazingly, this religious bridge building is common notwithstanding the fact that religion has become a potently divisive factor in partisan politics. While America's political parties have become divided by religion, Americans themselves have increasingly woven social webs that include people of many different religious backgrounds. Indeed, Americans are more likely to have friends of a different religion than a different political party. It is these interreligious relationships that Putnam and I describe as "America's grace" because they have enabled Americans to combine devotion and diversity with tolerance rather than turmoil.

III. Why so Many Aunt Susans and Pal Al's?

What has led America to be graced with this high degree of interreligious bridging? A major contributing factor is the nation's high rate


18. According to the 2011 Faith Matters survey, roughly half of Americans' close friends practice a different religion, while about a third have a different political party preference.
of religious flux. Americans often switch religions. Between 35% and 40% of all Americans, including 40% to 45% of whites, switch religions at some point in their lives.\textsuperscript{19} And this does not count Americans who stay within a given religion but switch from one congregation to another.

The fluidity of religious attachments contributes to interreligious bridging because it means that many, perhaps most, Americans have friends and family—or even a spouse—who have changed religions. Even without adding a single new friend or family member, religious flux alone can lead to increasing religious diversity within a social network. For example, Al, your longtime Baptist friend, converts to Catholicism. I suspect that the high degree of religious switching also contributes to interreligious personal relationships by reinforcing a social norm that, in America, religion is a "preference," rather than a fixed, ascriptive characteristic.\textsuperscript{20} In other cultures, religion is either difficult or impossible to change. In America, it is both easy and common.

If the frequency of religious switching fosters the conditions for interreligious bridging, what fosters religious switching? One extremely important contributing factor is the unique protection provided to religion by the U.S. Constitution. Together, the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses of the First Amendment have created something like a "greenhouse effect," in which a diverse religious ecosphere has thrived. Although it took a few decades for a consensus to emerge that "no established religion" included states as well as the federal government,\textsuperscript{21} eventually the absence of any government support for specific denominations ensured that religions in America could only survive and flourish by attracting and retaining believers.\textsuperscript{22} With no claim on the public purse, religions must convince people to contribute their own treasure freely. Any religion that does not teach a gospel that adherents find appealing will eventually wither and die. Furthermore, the Free Exercise Clause ensures legal protection for

\textsuperscript{19} Putnam & Campbell, supra note 1, at 137.


\textsuperscript{21} Noah Feldman, Divided by God: America's Church-State Problem—And What We Should Do About It 173 (2005) ("Once the Supreme Court had decided to allow taxpayer standing to sue for a violation of the Establishment Clause, it also broke new ground by officially recognizing that the separation of church and state at the level of state government was now a requirement of the federal Constitution."); see also Philip Hamburger, Separation of Church and State (2002).

many (albeit not all) distinctive religious practices. It also creates an entrepreneurial climate for new religions to emerge, as evidenced by the long and varied list of new and innovative religions born in America. That tally includes Mormons, Christian Scientists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Seventh-Day Adventists, among others.

In addition to the birth of new religions, even long-standing religions in America are rife with innovation. Examples of religious innovation are legion, but one relatively recent example stands out for its success, namely the mega-church. As a term of art, "mega" does not simply connote size; it has also come to mean a particular organizational form. These churches have memberships in the thousands and even tens of thousands, and thus hold very large worship meetings. However, those massive meetings are complemented by small study groups of perhaps a dozen people, often organized around affinities (like mountain biking) or demographics (moms with toddlers). In other words, the mega-church is a form of religion tailor-made to provide a sense of community during a time when other local institutions are disappearing and social capital is declining. While the mega-church is an example of a religious innovation that has spread nationwide through replication, on a smaller scale local clergy are constantly and quietly experimenting, fine-tuning, and tweaking their many efforts to maintain and grow their congregations.

Loosely speaking, the Establishment Clause has ensured that Americans have many religious options; the Free Exercise Clause ensures that these options are distinctive choices and not merely echoes of one another. Together, these two constitutional provisions have nurtured a culture in which Americans find it perfectly natural to refer to "church shopping." The result is a highly fluid religious ecosystem with a high rate of religious switching.

American Grace ends on an optimistic note. Putnam and I emphasize that America is, for the most part, a religiously tolerant nation. Most Americans get along with most people of most other religions, most of the time. Most, however, falls short of all because there are some partial exceptions to the general state of religious tolerance. Furthermore, there are developments on the horizon that threaten to disrupt the norm of religious acceptance. Putnam and I touch on these briefly in American Grace, but here I will go into more detail.  

25. For more discussion of the mega-church as an organizational form, see PUTNAM & CAMPBELL, supra note 1, at 37, 54–55. For more on religious innovations generally, see id. at 161–62.
While I use many of the empirical findings I discuss from the joint project with Putnam, any normative implications are mine alone.

IV. NONES

Perhaps the most significant development in the American religious landscape over the last two decades is the stunning rise of people who report having no religious affiliation. When asked what their religion is, they answer “none.” For many decades, the percentage of Americans who said that they had no religious affiliation remained steady at somewhere between 5% and 7%. Then, in the early 1990s, that number began to rise. According to the General Social Survey, it grew to 9% in 1993, 14% in 1998, 17% in 2008, and 18% in 2010. A 2012 study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that approximately 20% of Americans now report that they do not have a religious affiliation. At some point, the number of these nones will presumably hit a ceiling and stop growing, but that plateau has not yet been reached.

The rising number of nones presents a risk to religious tolerance in America, as their presence could lead to tensions between religious Americans, of whatever stripe, and secular Americans. In a theme that will be repeated throughout the remainder of this Article, the risk lies in the potential for these tensions to exacerbate our existing partisan divisions. Indeed, in a classic case of a feedback loop, it was those very divisions that led to the growth of the nones in the first place. The best available evidence indicates that an increasing number of Americans have walked away from religion because they equate religion with partisan politics, and specifically right wing politics. This is especially true among millennials (people under thirty), who have come of age in a period of religion-infused politics and politics-infused religion. To them, religion means conservative politics and the Republican Party. This is neither their politics nor their party, and so they decide that religion is not for them.

Sociologists Claude Fischer and Michael Hout first advanced the argument that the growth of the nones resulted from a reaction to the emergence of the “Religious Right.” At the time of their seminal article, the evidence for the rise of the nones was only circumstantial. Like the climactic scene in an Agatha Christie mystery, they eliminated every other culprit until “politics did it” remained the only viable explanation.}

ble possibility. Hout and Fischer proved prescient; the ensuing years brought to light evidence in support of their claim.\textsuperscript{28} In particular, Putnam and I found compelling evidence of precisely the process first described by Hout and Fischer and since confirmed by others. We again draw on our survey of repeated interviews with the same people over a five-year period. In doing so, we found that a powerful predictor of leaving religion—that is, becoming a none—is a respondent’s moderate-to-liberal politics. Furthermore, those who became nones were also much more likely to oppose the mixture of religion and politics than those who stuck with religion over this five-year period.\textsuperscript{29}

There is great irony that the rise of the Religious Right, and its incorporation into the Republican Party, has triggered this wave of people turning away from religion. The Religious Right was ostensibly formed to reassert the place of religion—or, at least, a particular type of religion—in American society.\textsuperscript{30} While the movement has ensured that issues relating to religion are a regular feature of our politics, it has done so at the price of collateral damage to religion writ large.

A full assessment of the nones’ impact on American society requires an accurate understanding of who they are. Importantly, most nones are not atheists. In fact, only about a quarter say that they definitely do not believe in God. According to the Pew Forum, 2.4% of the U.S. population describe themselves as atheists, which means that a fair number of people who meet the technical definition of an atheist are nonetheless resistant to the label.\textsuperscript{31} No matter how atheists are defined, they still remain a small share of the overall population. Furthermore, many nones have not completely disconnected from religion. Roughly half say that they pray at least occasionally, 25% say that they have “very often” experienced God’s love, and 10% even report attending religious services monthly or more.\textsuperscript{32}

In other words, the nones should not be considered completely lost to religion. Roughly half are not even full-time nones. Instead, they are what Putnam and I call “liminals”—people who straddle two iden-
In the course of interviewing and re-interviewing Americans, we found that only half of people who say that they have no religion at one point in time did so at another. The rest report an affiliation, even while exhibiting no sign of religious conversion or reawakening. Rather, these are people with a tenuous hold on a religious identity. Like a faulty light switch, it flickers on and off. These liminals are not ardent secularists, hostile to religion. A number of scholars refer to them as "spiritual but not religious." This label accurately reflects their reluctance to embrace the label of an organized religion, although it is not a term in widespread use. In our interviews, we found that very few Americans separate the concepts of "being spiritual" and "being religious." Most treat them as synonyms—to be spiritual is to be religious.

The mere fact that the nones are growing in number is not in and of itself a threat to religious tolerance. Rather, tolerance is at risk if there is antagonism between the nones and, for lack of a better word, the "religionists." And the risk is even greater if that antagonism aligns with partisan hostilities. If Republicans rail against secularists and Democrats against religionists, religion becomes a proxy war for partisan hostilities. I would contend that holy wars—even those fought rhetorically—can do great damage to the fabric of civil society.

While the heat of political battle can inflame tensions between religionists and the nones, another powerful force works to tamp down the hostility between the two camps. Remember our pal Al? Many, probably most, nones have a friend who is religious; likewise, an increasing number of Americans with a religious affiliation have a non-religious friend. In 2006, 44% of Americans said that they had a close friend who is "not religious." By 2011, that number had grown to 51%. Just as personal relationships between people of different faiths smooth out interreligious tensions, relationships between nones and religionists improve both groups' perceptions of one another. Already, we have seen evidence that nones can be welcomed into American society. Recall that greater religious diversity within friendship

33. For more on liminals, see Chaeyoon Lim, Carol Ann MacGregor & Robert D. Putnam, Secular and Liminal: Discovering Heterogeneity Among Religious Nones, 49 J. FOR SCI. STUD. RELIGION 596, 596-98 (2010).


35. These numbers come from the 2011 Faith Matters survey.
networks corresponds with a higher likelihood of accepting that nonbelievers can be good Americans. Of course, the existence of relationships between secular and religious Americans rests on whether they have opportunities to mingle with one another. Should American society continue to segregate along cultural lines, perhaps nones and religionists will have fewer and fewer opportunities to meet, become friends, and develop an appreciation for one another.

I am not suggesting that such segregation is inevitable, or even likely. Given the ebbs and flows of religion over the course of America's past, it seems just as likely that there will be a reversal of the growing number of nones. Remember that many nones remain open to religious beliefs; they primarily take issue with the mixture of religion and partisan politics. It seems possible, maybe even likely, that they would be receptive to religion if the political tinge were removed. Just as the mega-church was invented to compensate for a diminishing sense of community, perhaps some religious entrepreneur(s) will craft a form of religion that appeals to the nones. The data even suggest that some clergy have taken the first step—recognition of the problem. Comparing the 2006 and 2011 Faith Matters surveys reveals a dramatic decline in political appeals made by their clergy over this five-year period. It was as though clergy witnessed the collateral damage being done by the mixture of religion and politics and reacted by refraining from further political activity. According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, the trend appears to have continued in 2012. In a pre-election report, the researchers at Pew concluded that “[w]hile many regular churchgoers say they have been encouraged to vote by their clergy, relatively few say church leaders are discussing the candidates directly or favoring one candidate over the other.” The relative absence of partisan discussion over the nation’s pulpits is remarkable, given that the 2012 presidential election campaign featured abortion, gay marriage, contraception, and the meaning of religious liberty as issues.

V. MUSLIMS

While the rise of the nones presents a potential threat to religious tolerance in America, there is nothing “potential” about some Ameri-

37. See PUTNAM & CAMPBELL, supra note 9, at 575–76.
cans’ intolerant attitudes toward Muslims. When Putnam and I asked Americans about their perception of different religious groups, Muslims ranked near the bottom (although atheists score lower). In addition, we also asked whether respondents would be bothered by the construction of a Muslim mosque in their neighborhood. For comparison’s sake, we also asked respondents about their feelings toward a Buddhist temple and a Christian church. Of the three religious structures, a mosque was met with the greatest opposition. Thirty-five percent of Americans objected to a mosque, 25% to a Buddhist temple, and 8% to a Christian church.

Granted, these numbers can be interpreted in different ways. Compared to other groups, Muslims have a relatively low score, but their overall rating is still forty-three on a scale of 100, which has a neutral point of fifty. Muslims are thus reasonably close to a neutral score. And although more Americans object to a mosque than other places of worship, two-thirds say that they would be fine if a mosque were built in their neighborhood. My point is not to dismiss the reality of anti-Muslim sentiment in American society, but only to note that negativity toward Muslims is not universal.

It is tempting to infer that Americans’ suspicion toward Muslims has resulted from the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the continuing attention to terrorists with a Muslim background. While 9/11 certainly has not helped the public perception of Muslims, their “image problem” actually predates 2001. Detailing the pre-2001 perception of Muslims, one paper memorably refers to Muslims as members of a “band of others.”

There is an interesting parallel between Muslims today and both Catholics and Jews in the past. Like Muslims, Catholics and Jews were once reviled for their “exotic” beliefs, perceived insularity, undemocratic values, and alleged control by foreign influences. Both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw many battles—most legal, some literal—over the place of Judaism and Catholicism in American society. As recently as 1960, presidential candidate John F. Kennedy had to face the question of whether a Catholic could serve as President. Today, however, Catholics stand squarely in the American mainstream. In fact, according to the data Putnam and I collected,

39. Putnam & Campbell, supra note 1, at 504–08.
40. Id. at 493–515. We randomized the order in which respondents received the three different places of worship, so as not to bias the results. In each case, we also specified that the building under consideration would be “large.”
42. Feldman, supra note 21, at 167–70.
Catholics rank right next to Jews as the religious group viewed most positively by the American public.\textsuperscript{43}

It is worth underscoring that Catholics and Jews are viewed positively by their fellow Americans. Over the course of American history, both have suffered from discrimination and yet today they are highly regarded. Although anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism still exist, both types of prejudice have moved from widespread cultural acceptability to society's shadows.

While there are many reasons that Catholics and Jews have risen in favor, at the top of the list is Aunt Susan. There are many Jewish and Catholic Aunt Susans, and even more pal Als. America was once segregated along religious lines such that Catholics, Protestants, and Jews rarely intermingled. Today, Jews and Catholics are integrated into every aspect of American society.

The path of Jews and Catholics should give hope to American Muslims. While there is no guarantee that they too will eventually be met with the same degree of approbation, history is on their side. The key will be the assimilation—admittedly, a loaded word—of Muslims into American society. This process appears to have begun. While Muslims in Europe are often isolated and socially marginalized, in the United States their education and income is very similar to the rest of the American population.\textsuperscript{44} As the Muslim population in America grows, it remains an open question whether Muslims will increasingly mingle and, more controversially, intermarry with non-Muslims. If they do, I would expect their public perception to become more positive, although, as I explain below, this approval may come at a price many Muslims are unwilling to pay.

Whatever the long-term trajectory of Americans' attitudes toward Muslims, the current political environment presents a challenge to a healthy state of religious tolerance. As with attitudes regarding the nones, there is strong evidence for partisan polarization in attitudes toward Muslims. In a statistical model that weighs the many possible factors shaping Americans' attitudes toward Muslims—specifically, a mosque in one's neighborhood—Putnam and I find that the impact of party outweighs everything else, even religion. Compared to adherents of other religious traditions, evangelical Protestants are slightly more likely to be bothered by a mosque. And yet, compared to Democrats and independents, Republicans are far more likely to object to the construction of a mosque. Fifty-six percent of "strong" Republi-

\textsuperscript{43} Putnam & Campbell, supra note 1, at 505 fig.14.6.

\textsuperscript{44} See Pew Research Ctr., Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism 17 (2011).
cians would be bothered by a mosque, far outnumbering the 31% of independents and 24% of “strong” Democrats.\textsuperscript{45}

As to why Republicans have such antipathy toward Muslims, there are multiple possible hypotheses, including negative coverage of Muslims in conservative media, criticism of Muslims by Republican politicians, and less personal contact with Muslims among Republicans than Democrats. Perhaps the explanation lies in some combination of these factors, or in some other explanation altogether. Future research should be directed toward explaining the portentous connection between partisanship and attitudes toward Muslims. Although the reasons for this partisan inflection are unknown, it portends an unhealthy state for religious tolerance in America. Partisanship reinforcement of negative attitudes toward Muslims does not bode well for the broad acceptance of Muslims in all corners of American society.

VI. Mormons

Muslims are not the only religious group that faces derision in contemporary America. Mormons—more formally, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS Church)—are another. Americans’ perceptions of Mormons are not as low as Muslims, but they rank below most other religious traditions.\textsuperscript{46}

In some respects, the negativity Mormons face might seem puzzling. After all, their church is one of those home-grown sects that have flourished in America’s entrepreneurial religious climate. And yet, Mormonism has been controversial from the start. At its founding, the fledgling faith’s theology had plenty to offend—new scripture, the audacious claim to be Christ’s one and only true church, and a leader proclaimed to be a prophet on par with Moses or Abraham of old.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{45} See Putnam & Campbell, supra note 1, at 504; see also E.J. Dionne, Jr. & William A. Galston, Brookings Institution, The Old and New Politics of Faith: Religion and the 2010 Election 1–2 (2010). The terms “strong” Republican and “strong” Democrat refer to the standard scale used to measure differing degrees of attachment to a political party. Ratings usually include strong Republican/Democrat, not so strong Republican/Democrat, independent who leans toward one party or the other, or true independent.

\textsuperscript{46} Putnam & Campbell, supra note 1, at 505 fig.14.6.

\textsuperscript{47} Matthew Bowman, The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith, at xvii (2012) (“Mormons believe in the Bible, though Joseph Smith taught that errors and mistranslations might sometimes compromise its text. They also use three other works of scripture: the Book of Mormon, the record of an ancient American civilization the resurrected Christ visited; the Doctrine and Covenants, a collection of revelations given to Joseph Smith; and the Pearl of Great Price, a collection of inspired texts mostly produced by Joseph Smith.”).

Mormons believe that Christ established a church before his crucifixion, placed Peter at its head, and gave that church priesthood authority to perform the sacraments of
Most offensive of all was the nineteenth-century practice of polygamy (long since abandoned by the LDS Church and now only practiced by excommunicated fringe fundamentalists). 48

The controversy over Mormonism continues in the present. In a recent survey, the Pew Research Center asked Americans for the first word that comes to mind when they hear “Mormon” and found that one of the most common responses was “cult.” 49 In a similar survey, Gallup found that “polygamy” tops the list of top-of-the-head impressions. 50 In 2012, Pew also found that 32% of Americans say that Mormons are not Christians, a number that had not changed since they asked the same question in 2007 and 2011. 51 The Gallup Poll has periodically asked voters whether they would vote for a Mormon presidential candidate if nominated by their party. The percentage saying that they would not has hovered between 17% and 24% since 1967, in sharp contrast to other groups—like Jews, Catholics, blacks, and women—which meet with nearly universal approval. 52 The relatively flat line for approval of Mormons contrasts with other groups,

salvation: baptism, confirmation, the Lord’s supper, and other ordinances. But this authority and this church were lost in the intervening centuries, and Mormons believe that God chose Joseph Smith to restore them and, providentially, the United States of America as the place where they could be restored. . . .

In the strictest sense, Mormons do not believe that Joseph Smith established a “new” church at all. For Mormons, the history of humanity is much like the history of the Israelites in the Bible writ large . . . . It is also the history of God’s true church, which Mormons believe was given first to Adam, whom angels baptized and taught of Jesus Christ, before his descendants collapsed into the wickedness from which Noah was sent to save them. As was Abraham, as was Moses, as was, eventually, Joseph Smith himself. Each time humanity fell, God sent a priestly prophet to reorganize true worship and teach true doctrine.

Id. at xvi–xviii.


52. Lydia Saad, In U.S., 22% Are Hesitant to Support a Mormon in 2012, Gallup (June 20, 2011), http://www.gallup.com/poll/148100/hesitant-support-mormon-2012.aspx (“The stability in U.S. bias against voting for a Mormon presidential candidate contrasts markedly with steep declines in similar views toward several other groups over the past half-century, including blacks, women, Catholics, and Jews. The last time as many as 22% of Americans said they would not vote for any of these groups (the same level opposed to voting for a Mormon today) was 1959 for Catholics, 1961 for Jews, 1971 for blacks, and 1975 for women. As noted, opposition to voting for each of these has since tapered off to single digits.”).
such as atheists. Compared to Mormons, atheists are met with a relatively high degree of disapproval, as half of Americans say they would not vote for an atheist presidential candidate (as of 2011). Unlike Mormons, though, atheists' approval has been rising. In 1958, 75% of Americans said that they would not cast a presidential ballot for an atheist, compared to 51% in 1983 and 43% in 2012.53

The Gallup question asks about a hypothetical and thus unnamed candidate, but in research I conducted with John Green and Quin Monson in January of 2008, we found that voters reacted negatively upon learning that Mitt Romney is Mormon. At the time, Romney was a newcomer on the national scene and thus not well-known, although he was still a viable candidate for the Republican nomination. Support for Romney dropped by roughly thirty percentage points when subjects in our study read a biographical vignette that included the fact that Romney has been a local leader in the LDS Church (compared to those who read the same vignette, minus the information about Romney's religion).54 In early 2008, other research designed to minimize the bias toward “social desirability,” whereby people are reluctant to admit their prejudices, also found that 27% of voters expressed concern about a Mormon presidential candidate. In fact, this study found that, unlike discomfort with a candidate’s race or gender, concern about a Mormon president was not subject to social desirability bias. Voters did not feel compunction about openly admitting that they would not vote for a Mormon for President, suggesting that anti-Mormon attitudes are not checked by the same social norms as racism and sexism.55

While one can point to historical or theological tensions as the proximate causes for unease with Mormonism, the overriding explanation goes back to Aunt Susan and pal Al. There are relatively few Mormon Aunt Susans and not many Americans have a close friend who is Mormon. The comparison between Mormons and Jews is apt because both groups are roughly the same size. They differ, however, in that

54. See David E. Campbell, John C. Green & J. Quin Monson, The Stained Glass Ceiling: Social Contact and Mitt Romney’s “Religion Problem”, 34 POL. BEHAV. 277, 289–90 (2012) (“Interestingly, the 0.3 drop in the probability of Romney's support caused by the Mormon frame is roughly comparable to the share of the US population who openly say they will not vote for a Mormon presidential candidate.”).
Mormons are less likely than Jews to have friends, neighbors, and family members outside of their religion. According to the 2011 Faith Matter survey, roughly 8% of Americans claim that they have a Mormon as a close friend. By comparison, 18% of Americans have a close friend who is Jewish. Mormons are less likely than almost any other religious group to build bridges to members of other faiths.\textsuperscript{56}

It is not that Mormons are deliberately insular, walling themselves off from American society like the Old Order Amish. To the contrary, Mormons have demonstrated success in many different areas of American culture: business (J.W. Marriott, Stephen R. Covey), sports (Steve Young), entertainment (the Osmonds, David Archuleta), publishing (Stephanie Meyer), and politics (Harry Reid, Mitt Romney).

Rather, Mormons are an interesting challenge to the equilibrium of religious tolerance in America. When stripped down to its essentials, the story of religious tolerance is one of denominations, and even whole religious traditions, morphing together. Whereas religions were once divided by bright lines, today those boundaries have blurred. Religious intermarriage was once discouraged or even forbidden; today, it is commonplace and rarely controversial. Americans’ embrace of religious universalism—all good people can go to heaven—reflects the weakening of the walls that once separated people of different religions. Mormons, however, present a contrast to “blurry religion” because they draw sharp boundaries around their faith. In the nineteenth century those boundaries were geographic, as Mormons gathered in homogeneous communities—first in Ohio, then Missouri, then Illinois, and eventually in Utah.\textsuperscript{57} Today, the boundaries are symbolic but no less real.\textsuperscript{58} They adhere to a strict health code, have an extremely high level of engagement in religious activities, make substantial financial contributions to their church, participate in esoteric religious rites that are restricted only to devout members of their church, and place great emphasis on marrying within the faith.\textsuperscript{59} They also regularly speak of their faith as the “only true church.”\textsuperscript{60} Given

\textsuperscript{56. PUTNAM & CAMPBELL, supra note 1, at 525–26. The only religious groups whose members are less likely to bridge to people of other religions are African-American Protestants and Latino Catholics—both defined by ethnicity as well as religion.}

\textsuperscript{57. See generally MATTHEW BOWMAN, THE MORMON PEOPLE: THE MAKING OF AN AMERICAN FAITH (2012) (providing a general history of Mormonism, including the settlements in Kirtland, Ohio; Jackson County, Missouri; and Nauvoo, Illinois).}

\textsuperscript{58. See ARMAND L. MAUSS, THE ANGEL AND BEEHIVE: THE MORMON STRUGGLE WITH ASIMILATION 15–16 (1994).}


\textsuperscript{60. See Dallin H. Oaks, The Only True and Living Church, THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS, https://www.lds.org/youth/article/only-true-living-church?lang=eng (last
Mormons’ distinctiveness and deep commitment to their faith, we should not be surprised that they form tight-knit social networks. But, of course, those networks come at the cost of fostering suspicion and even hostility among other Americans, particularly evangelical Protestants.

In recent years, discussion of attitudes toward Mormons has gone from academic abstraction to political reality, owing to the presidential candidacy of Mitt Romney. As mentioned above, data collected during Romney’s unsuccessful campaign for the Republican nomination in the 2008 presidential cycle suggested that his Mormonism was a real political liability. Romney’s “Mormon problem” was comparable to John F. Kennedy’s “Catholic problem” in 1960. Romney even delivered a major address on his religion in December 2007, much like Kennedy did in 1960.

In the 2012 cycle, Romney’s religion was mostly a back-page story. Unlike both his own 2008 candidacy, and John F. Kennedy in 1960, Romney chose not to give a single prominent speech about his religion. When Romney surrogates have broached the candidate’s faith, it has typically been to highlight Romney’s time as a lay pastor (“bishop”). To those voters who were listening, these experiences humanized Romney, as they portrayed him as compassionate and selfless.

Whether because of these efforts to “normalize” Romney’s religion or, more likely, out of partisan loyalty, Romney’s Mormonism did not appear to harm him in the general election among evangelical voters. According to exit polls, 79% of white evangelicals voted for him. This is the same level of support evangelicals gave George W. Bush in 2004 and six points higher than John McCain’s share of the evangelical vote in 2008.

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visited May 2, 2013); see also CLAUDIA L. BUSHMAN, CONTEMPORARY MORMONISM: LATTER-DAY SAINTS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA 14 (2006) (“A cornerstone of Mormon beliefs is that Christianity, as originally established by Jesus Christ and his immediate followers, had gone through an apostasy in which the original authority—the priesthood—was lost. . . . When Mormons testify to their belief that the ‘Church is true,’ they mean that Joseph Smith restored the Church of Jesus Christ.”).

While Romney appears to have had the support of fellow Republicans, especially evangelicals, does this mean his candidacy will be a breakthrough for the public perception of Mormons? The data collected during the campaign is ambiguous. In July 2012, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released a report that found 20% of voters who were aware of Romney’s religion were “uncomfortable” with it.\(^65\) Pew headlined its study “Little Voter Discomfort with Romney’s Mormon Religion,” but I would suggest that the results are more ambiguous than that.\(^66\) In a classic case of having to decide whether a glass is half empty or half full, it seems reasonable to interpret 20% of voters openly expressing discomfort with a candidate’s religion as a lot, not a few. Imagine if 20% of voters said they were uncomfortable with Barack Obama’s race; I suspect the reaction would be less sanguine. Twenty percent, you will recall, is also the percentage of Americans that said that they would not vote for a Mormon presidential candidate.

In other words, the data suggest that Mitt Romney assuaged concerns about his Mormonism among evangelicals but, to borrow a metaphor, we do not yet know whether Mormonism will be able to ride his coattails to widespread public acceptance. As with nones and Muslims, attitudes toward Mormons appear to have a partisan cast. In the same Pew study mentioned above, 16% of Democrats said that they were uncomfortable with Romney’s religion, compared to only 10% of Republicans.\(^67\) Similarly, Gallup reported in June 2012 that responses to their generic “would you vote for a Mormon” question were divided by voters’ partisanship.\(^68\) Of course, in the midst of a heated presidential campaign, we should not be surprised that these questions were colored by voters’ partisan lenses. Voters are likely to respond to a question about a generic Mormon as a question about Mitt Romney, just as many voters in 2008 would have inferred that questions about an unnamed African-American candidate were really about Barack Obama, and therefore responded accordingly. At this point, it is not clear whether the current partisan reaction to Mormonism is a temporary response to the presidential campaign of 2012, or will become an enduring feature of the religious landscape.

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65. See Little Voter Discomfort, supra note 51.
66. See id.
67. See id. at 4.
Even if the partisan divisions do not linger, we do not yet know whether Mitt Romney's candidacy will prove to be a turning point in Americans' attitudes toward Mormons. Tens of millions of Americans have now cast a presidential ballot for a Mormon, while many thousands have contributed money to his campaign, shown up at his rallies, and displayed campaign signs on his behalf. Even those who did not support Romney saw a Mormon come close to winning the White House, and hold his own while debating the President of the United States. Will this soften attitudes toward Mormonism? The jury is still out.

The Romney candidacy presents an opportunity for Mormons. The past year or so has been described by many observers as the "Mormon Moment" because of both Romney and the hit Broadway play The Book of Mormon: The Musical. The research that Putnam and I conducted suggests that positive perceptions of Mormons—or any religious group—are fostered through social relationships. If Mormons are able to build on the current attention to their religion by creating those connections, it seems likely that the public perception of Mormons will improve. Put another way, the question is whether Mitt Romney will lead to more Mormon Aunt Susans and pal Als.

Whether or not attitudes toward Mormons change in the wake of Romney's campaign, I suggest that his candidacy nonetheless bodes well for the overall state of religious tolerance. His nomination as the Republican standard bearer is historic. Roughly 100 years ago, the country was consumed with whether a Mormon could serve in the U.S. Senate given that Reed Smoot had to endure three years of hearings before he could be seated as a Senator from Utah. Today, a Mormon has been nominated to run for President of the United States, and while there have been some concerns raised about his religion, he never faced the kind of outright anti-Mormonism that Smoot faced.

69. Pew Forum on Religion and Pub. Life, Pew Research Ctr., Mormons in America: Certain of Their Beliefs, Uncertain of Their Place in Society 9 (2012), available at http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Christian/Mormon/Mormons%20in%20America.pdf ("With a Mormon candidate among the front-runners for the 2012 GOP presidential nomination, a musical about Mormons playing on Broadway and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) running television ads about ordinary Mormons, America is in the midst of what some media accounts have dubbed a 'Mormon moment'.").

VII. PARTISANSHIP

As I have noted throughout this Article, I see the greatest threat to religious tolerance as the mutual reinforcement of partisan identification and attitudes toward different religious groups. The reason for my concern lies in what the political science literature has learned about the nature of party affiliation. One compelling theory of party identification conceives of it as a social identity, not unlike other identities such as ethnicity or religion. The identity is formed because of the groups commonly associated with each party: businesspeople and the Republican party, union members and the Democratic party. Voters form a bond with a party both because of affinity toward “their” own party’s groups and antipathy toward the groups allied with the other side. These group associations run deep into a voter’s psyche and are thus hard to change. If deep identification with a party becomes tightly intertwined with antagonism toward a particular religious group, religious tensions could spill over into the nation’s ever-bitter partisan battles, and become “baked into” our party system.

VIII. IMPLICATIONS OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

Thus far, I have detailed three potential challenges to religious tolerance in America: the rise of the nones, Muslims, and Mormons. I turn now to a different type of challenge posed by a norm of religious tolerance, at least as it is expressed in the contemporary United States. Simply put, the question is whether religious tolerance is, on balance, salutary for American society. Since the publication of American Grace, reviewers and commentators have often raised this question. While Putnam and I laud America’s religious tolerance, some commentators have asked whether America’s blurry religious boundaries have enervated religion’s role as a force for change. If religious boundaries blur, does religion lose its prophetic voice? Writing about American Grace in the Dallas Morning News, Rod Dreher described it as follows:

But it should be remembered that a religion that makes no demands on people other than that they follow their bliss and be nice to everybody else is a religion that has no power to change minds and hearts. It will not inspire people to heroic deeds of self-sacrifice for the greater good. Nor is it likely to endure.72

Dreher raises a good but open question: Does a religion have to be particularistic to inspire self-sacrifice? I have given scores of public

71. See Donald Green et al., Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters 1–6 (2002).
lectures about *American Grace* and often conclude the talk with that quotation, asking the audience whether they think it is true. Invariably, someone in the audience will point to the most compelling counter example of Dreher's point, namely the civil rights movement of the twentieth century. The movement was born and nurtured in churches and had strong religious overtones, but did not promote a particular religious perspective, nor any religious view at all. And, clearly, the civil rights movement inspired people to heroic deeds of self-sacrifice for the common good.

I tend to agree with those audience members who question whether religion must be exclusionary to be prophetic, in the sense of summoning believers to change themselves or their society. The pro-life movement provides another contemporary example. Catholics and evangelical Protestants were once at theological loggerheads, but have found common cause in their opposition to abortion. What theology put asunder, politics has joined together.

Whatever the consequences for societal harmony, what are the consequences of an Aunt Susan society for the internal vitality of particular religions? Interreligious bridge building can forge political coalitions and tamp down religious strife, but what does it mean for religious vigor? In their magisterial book *The Churching of America*, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark argue that religions only flourish when they are in tension with society.\(^73\) Similarly, Christian Smith and his colleagues speak of how evangelicalism has thrived because it is "embattled"—standing firm against a secular society that evangelicals see as attacking their values.\(^74\) Tension and embattlement require a religion to be distinctive. Given the trend toward reduced distinctions and tensions among religions, does this mean that the vitality of America's religions will eventually peter out? Because religion remains a powerful form of identity, even in the age of Aunt Susan, its energy will not be depleted any time soon. The question is whether that energy will be replenished in future generations if religious boundaries continue to blur. I leave this as a question, but one that observers of religion should seek to answer in the years and decades to come.

**IX. Conclusion**

Groups like Muslims and Mormons thus face a dilemma. They are both highly distinctive—in tension with secular society—and as em-

\(73\) See Finke & Stark, *supra* note 22, at 1-12.

battled as evangelicals ever were. As a consequence, they have not yet been fully accepted into the religious mainstream. Should they choose a path of greater assimilation into the mainstream—more bridging than bonding—history suggests that they will gain greater acceptance within society, both by members of other faiths and people without a religious affiliation. Yet, in doing so they risk losing the very distinctiveness that fosters their religious vitality.

In closing, I am enough of an optimist to believe that, while there will always be challenges to religious tolerance in America, the long-term trends suggest that it will endure and even expand. The religious protections of the First Amendment have created an environment whereby both religious devotion and diversity can coexist symbiotically, which is good for the overall state of religious tolerance. But whether it is good for the internal vitality of any given religion remains to be seen.