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Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, American Grace. How Religion Divides and Unites Us. New York: Simon Schuster, 2010, 688 pp.

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Book reviews

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The transformation of the role of religion in American public life can be represented in the narrative of two different J.F.K.s. In the 1960s, the Catholic J.F. Kennedy, in order to be elected, had to overcome the mistrust of the Protestant electorate. But he was able to take for granted the Catholic vote, even if his ideas were not exactly in line with the Vatican hierarchy. Forty years later, the Catholic J.F. Kerry – who opposes some themes within the Vatican doctrine of bioethics – is rejected by most observant Catholics. Instead, this component of the electorate prefers the “born again” evangelical protestant, G.W. Bush. If, during Kennedy’s time, it was membership within a specific religion (e.g., Catholic, Protestant, Jewish) that divided Americans, now they are polarized according to the “intensity” of their religious experience. Such is identified through an agreement with some values, such as creationism, aversion to abortion, gay marriage, divorce, etc. These themes, meanwhile, have entered the programs of the political parties. This situation has led to an alliance between the moral conservatism, derived from religion, which defends the traditional vision of women, sexuality and family, and the political conservatism that opposes the intervention of the State to reduce inequalities. The political arena is now divided into two camps: On one hand, the “very religious” (of any faith), who vote mostly Republican and, on the other hand, the seculars (or “less religious”), who vote mostly Democratic.

Although it may seem natural or inevitable, such unions have not always existed. Instead, the cornerstone of American identity (i.e., WASP) has long been represented by the “religious moderates” who identified with the mainline Protestant religions. What happened?

It all began, according to the authors of the book, with the “cultural revolution” of the 1960s that denied sexual taboos, rejected the traditional role of women, and denounced war and imperialism. The change also affected the religious field in which movements that seem to support it became established. Protestantism spread the liberal theology and the theology of “the death of God;” in Catholicism, the reforms of Vatican II were perceived by many as the Church’s attempt to catch up with the emerging cultural fervour.

This “updating” inside the two main religions, however, failed to generate the desired results. In fact, during the same years we witnessed a dramatic loss of believers in the traditional Protestant and Catholic churches. Young people (the Baby Boomers, who were born in the post-war period) ran away. In the meantime, the “religious seekers,” the “self-made-religion,” and the New Age movement, became more widespread.

This initial cultural shock is followed by a “counter shock” that is represented both by the rapid growth of fundamentalist religions (30% of the population today belongs to them) that welcome a part of deserters from the mainline churches, as well as by the convergence of religious and political conservatism. “Religion” is now increasingly

associated with the Republican Party that is commonly perceived to be more “religion friendly” than the Democratic Party. The first counter-shock, however, determines a second. The more religion is identified with political conservatism, the more those who do not identify with those ideals tend to abandon it: “If being religious means to be Republican, religion is not for me.” The “churchless” – those who answer “none” to the question: Which religion do you belong? – have grown up. The increasing number of “Nones” now exceeds that of the faithful among the declining mainstream religions.

But if the symbiosis between religion and conservatism is a relatively recent phenomenon, the propensity toward “conversion” is part of the habitus of the Americans, who are always inclined to consider religion primarily as a free “choice” and disposed to change it. The continuing religious migrations, which have accelerated since the 1960s, have, on one side, favoured the political polarization, while on the other, caused a continuous mixing of relations between people of different (or no) religion. It is in this new configuration of the social environment that the authors identify the cause of the widespread tolerance and of the absence of religious conflict in America.

Half of Americans today have a spouse who comes from another religious tradition, and even if some convert, a third of all marriages remain interfaith. Moreover, merely 7% has neighbours that are only of the same religion, just 24% have close friends only of the same religion, merely 31% have family members only of the same religion, and so on. When talking about diversity, Americans discuss their experience: either they have personally changed religion or they know someone who did.

The acceptance of pluralism (84% not only tolerates the existence of pluralism of faiths in the USA, but considers it an wealth for the country) depends on the particular social capital produced by the fluidity of American religion.

The capital generated by specific religions cements together homogeneous people and distinguishes them from the others. Along with this capital (bounding), which potentially generates segregation and conflict, there are other forms that by their very nature are intended to connect people of diverse backgrounds (bridging capital). The contact between diverse people reduces prejudice: The more our networks are plural, the more we are prepared to positively consider religions other than our own. This second type of capital, the authors conclude, is therefore essential for the proper functioning of a differentiated society.

They exemplify this through two principles, whose validity is verified in research: the “Aunt Susan Principle” and the “My Friend Al Principle.” All Americans have an “aunt” who is the prototype of the good person, but whom belongs to a faith other than their own (or has no faith). No doctrine and no preacher can convince them that Susan, whom they love, is not intended to reach Paradise. But if she goes there, the other members of her church probably will as well. Instead, the “My Friend Al Principle” says that if – as is often the case – you become a friend of Al, whom belongs to a church other than your own, for any non-religious affinity, your opinion of the religion of Al will improve. Moreover, as a spillover effect, your judgement on all other religions and even on non-religious peoples will also improve.

The same theory is used to explain the persistence of prejudice towards Muslims and Buddhists. Because of the small size of these religions – which are primarily asso-

ciated with immigrants – it is rare that you have knowledge of, friendships, or family relationships with individuals whom practice such beliefs. And this also applies to the Mormons who, despite being “Americans,” are distinguished by the lack of friendships outside of their church. Prejudices will be overcome if and when many Americans have friends and relatives among the Muslims, Buddhists, and Mormons. An important corollary of these arguments is that the prejudice has nothing to do with the content of religions or their supposed threat to society; however, it all depends on the different opportunities to get in touch with their people.

The spread of bridging capital modifies consolidated clichés. If, in the 1920s, 96% of Americans believed that only Christianity contained the possibility of salvation, today approximately 80%, depending on age, thinks the opposite: that you can be saved even if you are not a Christian. Further, 87% believe that even a person without faith may be a good American. Such tolerant ideas are as much shared as more plural is the religious environment in which the person lives.

Such a high rate of acceptance of diversity is the result of the autonomous interpretation of the believers. The practice of inter-religious networks brings Americans to believe, often contradicting the leaders of their churches interested in maintaining a degree of exclusivity of their faith, that “Aunt Susan” and “my friend Al” will be saved and, with them, the other members of the respective churches. So, they reinterpret, with a classic “do-it-yourself” operation, the official doctrines of their churches.

To understand these changes, we must consider the specifics of religion in America. First, the congregational form that churches tend to take. Unlike the parish, to which people automatically belong, the congregation is a multi-purpose association of the faithful who choose and maintain it (and of which 90% are satisfied). The tendency to religious competition, which is implicit in the congregational system, pushes the pastors to invest heavily in creating activities that strengthen the bond between the faithful and hold them to their church. The model of the congregation – which stimulates interest and participation – is so internalized in the religious habitus that other religions (including Catholicism) end up taking it on American soil.

Another aspect of American religion that is highlighted by the authors is its ability to innovate. There is continuity between religious entrepreneurs who, at the time of the conquest of the West, organized a chapel car or arranged circuit riding in order to take the religion where there is a potential demand throughout the territories to be colonized, and contemporary inventors of “on-line religions,” who try to intercept the needs of Internet users, as well as founders of mega-churches that meet the needs of aggregation and of meaning in the metropolitan suburbs. The capacity for innovation, combined with the propensity of Americans to change their religion, lead the authors to conclude that the current politico-religious polarization is not fated to last.

Here their speech leaves the ground of empirical data and launches into hypothesis; however, based on research results. Despite the growth of the “Nones,” secularization as we witness it in Europe, does not seem to be the destiny of America. Too different are the context and data on religious participation. It is more likely that the capacity for innovation, the fluidity, the entrepreneurial spirit, and the strength of the congregation, will, in the long run, produce a new landscape and a different relationship between religion and politics.

The connection between being “very religious” and voting Republican is the result of contingencies that, only since the eighties, led to the convergence of religion and political conservatism highlighting issues of sexuality, family, abortion and gay marriage. But it is not said that should be so. The prejudices about homosexuality are declining, as is the liberal stance on abortion. In both cases, it is primarily young people who have matured these beliefs; so we can assume that those issues should not be so decisive in the future and that religion, eventually unchained from conservatism, might be, as was the case in the past, also allied with progressive issues. Much depends on the possibility of involving the religious “Nones” which, as research shows, are not atheists, but mostly believers without a specific belonging. If, for an European priest or pastor, the task would be to take them back to the church – a quite challenging mission – for an American religious entrepreneur, the problem is the opposite: How to bring the church to the Nones?

If we accept the hypothesis that they avoid religion mainly as a result of its identification with fundamentalism and conservatism, their “recovery” can only be triggered by an offer that can combine religious values with liberal positions on ethical and political issues. In this, the mainline Protestant religions that are traditionally liberal and not linked to political conservatism may have a role. Although this now seems unlikely, given the downward trend of these religions, it is doubtful that it is impossible. Provided that these churches are able to reformulate the offer (i.e., restoring a sense of spiritual reverence; focusing on what people do, rather than on doctrinal orthodoxy; emphasizing the “spirituality” that characterizes the young adults; avoiding issues such as sexuality, abortion, homosexuality, etc.). This would ultimately bring a touch of evangelicalism without the conservative political implications that it entails today. There are some current examples that are going in this direction – such as the emerging church described by Dan Kimball – but it is too early to say whether they will multiply or other models will prevail.

The research, which was conducted on a sample of 3000 people, many of whom were re-interviewed after one year, provides a convincing picture of the state of religion in the U.S. The comparison with other surveys enables the authors to reconstruct the changes in the political-religious landscape. The survey is structured in order to be able to “document” with empirical data each of the arguments presented in the book, while a series of vignettes that describe in an informal but fascinating way the life of several churches allows those who do not have a direct experience to understand the richness and diversity of American religion. Overall, the book is easy to read – even if sometimes a bit repetitive – for language and clarity of argument. Of note, finally, the use of the Clarify program that transforms the results derived from complex multivariate statistical models into intuitive graphs that are accessible outside of the inner circle of methodologists.

References

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