Religion can be divisive. For example, 72 percent of Americans say the country is divided along religious lines. That sounds like a lot, and it is. However, the potential for religious conflict can be put in context when we compare Americans’ perceptions of religious division to other types of division. The perceived degree of religious divisiveness pales when compared to divisions by race, class, or politics:

- 93 percent of Americans believe America is divided along racial lines
- 96 percent see divisions along economic lines
- 97 percent say the country is divided along political lines.¹

The fact that religion is not nearly so divisive as race, class, or politics is the puzzle this article seeks to solve. How can America be both devout and diverse without fracturing along religious lines? To be devout but not diverse would lead to little division (for example, Poland); likewise, if a society is religiously diverse but not devout (for example, The Netherlands). In the former case, there is little to disagree about. In the latter, there might be much to disagree about but little motivation to do so.

Rather than emphasize religion’s potential divisiveness, in this article we instead highlight how describing religion as merely “not very divisive” hardly does justice to its role in American public life. For many Americans, religion serves as a sort of civic glue, uniting rather than dividing. Next, we show how most Americans embrace religious diversity—including those who are

¹These figures are all from the 2006 Faith Matters survey. The data from the 2006 survey can be accessed at the Roper Center Public Opinion Archive at www.ropercenter.uconn.edu.
highly secular and those who are highly religious. We shall also see that many Americans experience religious diversity on a personal scale. Americans typically have friends and family of different faiths, creating their own religiously diverse social networks. We provide new evidence that the diversity embodied within these networks enables the peaceful coexistence of myriad religions in contemporary America. We then go on to demonstrate that most of the American population—save a small but intensely religious segment—are reluctant to assign a unique status to any religion as “true,” even their own. A majority of Americans believe that members of other faiths can go to heaven, and this is true even in religions that explicitly teach that salvation is reserved for their own adherents. Finally, we argue that Americans’ expansive view of heaven results from their personal experience with people of different religious backgrounds, including their close friends and family. America manages to be both religiously diverse and religiously devout because it is difficult to damn those you know and love.

**Civil Religion**

For many Americans, religion—or at least a belief in God—serves to bind the nation together. Embedded in the American psyche is an implicit article of patriotic faith that the nation owes its very existence, and survival, to a God in the heavens. References to deity thus abound during the solemn ceremonial moments of our public life, when the national sense of unity is strongest. When our leaders seek to mobilize, inspire, or console, they invoke God. In arguing that religion serves as a glue holding America’s civil society together, sociologist Robert Bellah has described the nation’s *civil* religion, which stands apart from the beliefs of any particular sect, denomination, or religious tradition. In his words, “The civil religion was able to build up without any bitter struggle with the church powerful symbols of national solidarity and to mobilize deep levels of personal motivation for the attainment of national goals.”

Civil religion has no partisan overtones. Thus, Thomas Jefferson (Democrat) declared independence with the bold statement that the Creator endowed mankind with inalienable rights. Abraham Lincoln (Republican) found meaning in the Civil War at Gettysburg by poignantly declaring that America, “under God, shall have a new birth of freedom.” John F. Kennedy (Democrat) began his presidency asking for God’s blessing and help, “but knowing that here on earth God’s work must truly be our own.” George W. Bush (Republican) consoled the nation following the September 11 terrorist attacks by saying that he prayed for the comfort of a “power greater than any of us” and citing the 23rd Psalm, “Even though I walk through the valley of the

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3 Technically, Jefferson was a Democratic-Republican, the forerunner of the modern Democratic Party.
shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me.” And lest one think that the growing connection between religiosity and the vote means that civil religion has been supplanted by partisan appeals to religion, such that God is invoked only by Republicans these days, consider the inaugural address of Barack Obama (Democrat). In it, he spoke of “the knowledge that God calls on us to shape an uncertain destiny.”

From Jefferson to Obama, the United States has become far more diverse in religious terms, and yet appeals to God at times of national unity are still de rigueur. America’s civil religion endures, notwithstanding the myriad faiths, creeds, denominations, and religious traditions found within the population. The First Amendment to the Constitution says that Congress shall pass no law to curtail the free exercise of religion, but these sparse words do not fully reflect the way in which religious diversity is encoded in America’s national DNA. Examples abound. Every Thanksgiving—the major holiday almost every religion can agree on—Americans celebrate the arrival of the Pilgrims, recounting the Puritans’ desire for refuge from religious persecution. In naming the four essential human freedoms, Franklin Roosevelt included the quintessentially American sense of religious liberty, “the freedom of every person to worship God in his own way.”

**Religious Diversity**

The civic role of religion has resulted, in large part, from the unique constitutional status afforded religion. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states that Congress will not endorse, or “establish,” a religion. In the immediate wake of the nation’s founding, this clause did not preclude states from supporting particular denominations by, for example, allowing clergy to be paid out of the public purse. By the early 1800s, all such public subsidies for religion had ended and non-establishment was taken to mean that all levels of government are precluded from providing financial support to any particular religion. Thus, no religion has been established as the official national church. Likewise, the U.S. Constitution also prohibits religious tests for public officials. Today, this may seem like a quaint provision, but at the time of the founding it was a significant issue, given that England had employed the Test Acts to limit public office to members of the Church of England. To borrow language from the marketplace, governments in America have not been picking winners and losers in the religious “economy.” Instead, religions have had to fend for themselves in attracting, and retaining, members. Furthermore, the constitutional protection provided to the free exercise of religion has created social space for the public expression of religion. This combination—a government

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restricted from supporting any particular religion, while individuals are largely unfettered from exercising a wide array of religions—has given American religion its vitality.

No founding father is more closely associated with religious liberty than Thomas Jefferson, whose convictions on the subject were undoubtedly affected by his own unorthodox religious beliefs. Jefferson famously summarized the way many Americans think about religious differences: “It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”

Jefferson’s sentiment provides a vision of religious tolerance that is essentially a quid pro quo—you let me worship as I please and I will do the same for you. By and large, Americans today hold to Jefferson’s philosophy. Eighty-five percent agree that “morality is a personal matter and society should not force everyone to follow one standard.” Even among the most religious Americans, half believe that morality is a personal matter.

If the Jeffersonian conception of religion as a personal, private matter were the extent of how Americans accommodate religious difference, it would probably suffice for keeping simmering religious tensions from boiling over. However, grudging acceptance of others’ religious beliefs would mean only that religious diversity is tolerated, not seen as an intrinsically good state of affairs. It could be that religious believers deign to tolerate other religions purely for self-preservation, calculating that since no single religion has majority status, it is best to grant a full measure of liberty to other faiths, to ensure maximum liberty for oneself. That is, it could be that Americans do not really think that religious diversity per se is good, but only the best possible situation under the circumstances.

It could be that way, but it appears not to be. By a wide margin, Americans see the value in religious diversity for its own sake. As we see in Figure 1, when asked whether “religious diversity has been good for America,” 84 percent agree. Furthermore, the endorsement of religious diversity remains high regardless of Americans’ own religiosity. While religious diversity loses a little luster among those with the highest levels of religiosity, they still endorse it overwhelmingly (74 percent of Americans in the top decile of religiosity see the good in religious diversity).

Perhaps, you might think, the widespread endorsement of religious diversity hangs on the normative force of “diversity” as the buzzword of our time. Who would dare admit that they are uncomfortable with diversity of any sort? In the words of legal scholar Peter Schuck, “Diversity is right up there with

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7 Meaning those in the top decile of religiosity.
progress, motherhood, and apple pie." It seems reasonable, therefore, to be suspicious that Americans pay lip service to religious diversity but really harbor suspicions about those of other faiths. After all, we have seen that at least a few religious groups get a chilly reception. What can we really tell about Americans’ attitudes regarding religious diversity from abstract questions with little bearing on anyone’s daily life? They talk the talk, but do they walk the walk? One answer lies in the religious complexion of our most-intimate associations, namely family and friends.

As we describe in detail in our book *American Grace*, in the most intimate association of all, marriage, Americans are increasingly comfortable with religious diversity. One third of all Americans are married to someone of a different religious tradition, and one half are married to someone who came from a different tradition (the difference being explained by spousal conversions).

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However, we do not wish to leave the impression that interreligious marriage is equally fine with everyone. When Americans are asked to project into the future about the potential marriage of a child, we see a measure of ambivalence about marrying outside one’s faith. This ambivalence is a perfect illustration of the tension between the religious devotion and diversity that characterizes American society. On the one hand, over two in five Americans say that it is very (22 percent) or somewhat (20 percent) important that their child marry someone of the same religious background. Not surprisingly, it is the most highly religious who place the greatest value on their children marrying someone of the same religion.\textsuperscript{10} On the other hand, this still leaves a majority of Americans who say either that it is not important at all (39 percent) or not very important (18 percent) that their children marry within their religion. Interreligious marriage, while not a problem for most Americans, is a concern for some.

We can probe further into Americans’ lived experience with religious diversity using a measure that asks about one’s neighbors, extended family, and friends. For neighbors and extended family, we asked for a general report—roughly what proportion has the same religious affiliation as you? The results (Figure 2) make clear that Americans live in religiously diverse neighborhoods. Only 7 percent say that all of their neighbors share the same religion, and nearly a third report that none do. Not surprisingly, extended families are less diverse than neighborhoods, but even there we find a reasonably high degree of religious heterogeneity. Sixteen percent of Americans indicate that no one in their extended family shares their religion; roughly one in three say that everyone in their extended family does. When it comes to friends, we asked our respondents to be more precise (see Figure 3). How many of their five closest friends share their religion? Just under a quarter (24 percent) of Americans say that all of their five closest friends have the same religious affiliation that they do, while 17 percent say that none of them do. On average, they told us that 2.6 of their five closest friends are co-religionists.\textsuperscript{11}

These numbers all point toward a single conclusion—most Americans are intimately acquainted with people of other faiths. Two out of three have at least one extended family member who is of another religion, while the average

\textsuperscript{10} Of people in the top decile of religiosity, 61 percent say it is very important that their child marry within the faith, while another 21 percent say it is somewhat important.

\textsuperscript{11} It is reasonable to ask whether estimates of religious heterogeneity within a friendship network are likely to be accurate. The literature on political heterogeneity within social networks suggests that people tend to overestimate the degree of political congruence among their friends; Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague, Citizens, Politics, and Social Communication: Information and Influence in an Election Campaign (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995). We suspect that religion is a lot like politics, in that neither affiliation is immediately apparent. However, our interest below is in examining what happens when religious diversity within a social network increases. As long as the misreporting of religious diversity remains constant between the two waves of the Faith Matters study, it will not affect our interpretation of change. It would be like a bathroom scale that always adds five pounds to your weight. Such a scale would be inaccurate, but could still indicate whether you have gained weight.
American has at least two (technically, 2.4) close friends with a religious affiliation different from theirs. When we ask Americans about religious diversity, they speak from personal experience.

The constitutional framework for religion in America does not guarantee this degree of interfaith mingling, mixing, and matching, but it has enabled the religious fluidity that we have described throughout this book. This fluidity, in turn, facilitates interpersonal connections across religious lines. Religious churn means that many Americans change religions, thus introducing family and friends to their new faith. So even if you never change your religion, you almost certainly know someone who has. Such a high state of flux also facilitates the acceptance of religious intermarriage, as it is difficult to maintain bright lines between religions when the boundaries are blurred by frequent switching from one to another.

Some boundaries, however, are blurrier than others. While most Americans have close associations with people of other religions, there are also fascinating differences in the degree to which they experience religious diversity closely. Members of some religious traditions are more likely to have friends, family,
and neighbors of different religions than are members of other faiths. We can most easily see these differences by combining all three types of relationships together into a single measure of overall religious homogeneity within one’s personal social network.

As displayed in Figure 4, Latino Catholics are most likely to score high in religious homogeneity—far higher than any other religious groups. While below Latino Catholics, black Protestants also rank high. The high degree of homogeneity is to be expected for both Latinos and African Americans, as people tend to associate with others of the same ethno-racial group. Latinos are thus likely to be friends with other Latinos, and blacks with other blacks. Likewise, we would expect them to be friends with Latino Catholics and black Protestants. The result is that both groups have a high level of religious homogeneity among their family, friends, and neighborhoods. The especially high degree of homogeneity among Latino Catholics is likely a reflection of limited integration between Latino and non-Latino populations within the United States.

Black Protestants are matched by Mormons in their degree of religious homogeneity. (The gap between the two groups is too small to be statistically

meaningful.) Here we have further evidence that Mormons resemble an ethnic group. Mormons have an unusually high strength of religious identity, and share a distinctive culture. Furthermore, they are often met with disapproval from members of other religions. As a cause, a consequence, or both, Mormons stick together: they marry each other, live by each other, and associate with one another. Puzzlingly, “Anglo” Catholics also have a relatively high level of religious homogeneity. This might have been expected in the 1950s or earlier, when the Church stressed the importance of marrying within the faith and Catholics were concentrated in the ethnic neighborhoods of urban centers. Today, however, Catholics have a high rate of interreligious marriage, and increasingly have left the old neighborhoods in the city to buy a house in the suburbs. When put alongside the relatively high regard Catholics show for fellow Catholics, the relatively high degree of religious homogeneity within their social networks is perhaps less surprising. Both are mutually reinforcing evidence that while the explicitly ethnic dimension of Catholicism has faded—except among Latinos—“Anglo” Catholics nonetheless are somewhat more likely to stick together than are either evangelical or mainline Protestants, or even Jews.

\[\text{FIGURE 4}\]

Members of Different Religious Traditions Differ in the Religious Homogeneity of their Family, Friends, and Neighbors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Tradition</th>
<th>In top quartile of religious homogeneity index (family, friends, neighbors)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latino Catholic</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Protestant</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Anglo“ Catholic</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Protestant</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline Protestant</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Although differences in levels of religious diversity by religious tradition are interesting and important, one should not miss the forest for the trees. Most Americans are intimately acquainted with people of other faiths. This, we argue, is the most important reason that Americans can combine religious devotion and diversity. We call it the “Aunt Susan Principle.” We all have an Aunt Susan in our lives, the sort of person who epitomizes what it means to be a saint, but whose religious background is different from our own. Maybe you are Jewish and she is a Methodist. Or perhaps you are Catholic and Aunt Susan is not religious at all. But whatever her religious background (or lack thereof), you know that Aunt Susan is destined for heaven. And if she is going to heaven, what does that say about other people who share her religion or lack of religion? Maybe they can go to heaven too.

To put the Aunt Susan Principle in more technical terms: We are suggesting that having a religiously diverse social network leads to a more positive assessment of specific religious groups, particularly those with low thermometer scores. In offering this hypothesis, we can look beyond our hypothetical Aunt Susan for reasons to think that religiously diverse social networks do indeed have a positive effect on interreligious acceptance. One place to find such a rationale is in the literature on social capital, by which we mean the norms of trust and reciprocity that arise out of our social networks. Some social capital consists of bonding, or interconnections among people with a common background. Other social capital is bridging in nature, and thus connects people of different backgrounds. While both bonding and bridging each serve important purposes, bridging is vital for the smooth functioning of a diverse society. When birds of different feathers flock together, they come to trust one another.14

The significance of bridging social capital for building intergroup acceptance is rooted in the venerable theory of social contact. This theory is often loosely described as positing that contact among people of different but salient social groups reduces prejudice. That, however, is not an accurate description of the theory. As articulated in the mid-1950s by Gordon Allport, the theory actually says that four conditions have to hold before contact diminishes prejudice: all parties must have equal status, share common goals, have intergroup cooperation, and have the support of authorities, law, or custom. In the setting of an interreligious friendship, the first and the fourth are clearly met: most friendships presumably entail equal status, and the sheer frequency of interreligious contact indicates its widespread societal support. The constitutional protections afforded religious liberty contribute further to the normative force behind religious diversity. Furthermore, very few religious traditions actively discourage their members from interacting with those of other faiths; indeed,

the evangelistic nature of many American religions means that they encourage making friends with people of different religious backgrounds. It also seems likely that friendships are characterized by the second and third conditions, namely common goals and cooperation. Indeed, in reviewing hundreds of intergroup contact studies, social psychologists Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp “assumed that friendship requires the operation of conditions that approach Allport’s specifications for optimal contact.”15 Their results confirm that intergroup friendships are an example of the socially salutary consequences of contact among people of different social groups. The Pettigrew and Tropp analysis even suggests that intergroup friendships reduce prejudice to a greater extent than do other forms of contact, leading Pettigrew to recommend that “potential for friendship” be added as a fifth condition to the social contact theory.16

We expect that religious diversity within social networks—religious bridging—will foster greater interreligious acceptance. We find that this is indeed the case when you look at who is friends with whom. To pick just one example, there is a positive correlation between, say, having an evangelical friend and rating evangelicals positively. On its own, we concede, such a finding is not terribly persuasive; there is obviously a huge problem in determining what causes what. Do you rate evangelicals positively because you have an evangelical friend, or are you friends with an evangelical because you are warm toward evangelicals? With a survey taken at a single point in time, this is impossible to answer.

Far more convincing is an analysis of who becomes friends with whom. In American Grace, we have used the fact that the Faith Matters surveys can measure changes in the same individuals over time to show that politics affects religion and that gaining more religious friends increases good neighborliness, civic engagement, and even happiness. Now we employ the same type of analysis to see whether an increase in religious bridging leads to an increase in interreligious acceptance. While we must caution that such an analysis of panel data does not definitely determine causation—the Holy Grail of any social science analysis—it does provide much stronger evidence for causation than a single-shot survey.17
The logic of the analysis is simple. We simply see whether, over the course of a year, gaining a friend of group X means warmer feelings toward group X. Note that we exclude anyone who has adopted the religious label in question, to rule out the possibility that because respondents have converted to a new religion, they simultaneously gained new friends in that same religion and became more positive toward it. For example, anyone who became an evangelical is excluded when we examine the impact of gaining an evangelical friend. Our results, then, cannot be explained by an enthusiasm for a new way of life that both increases the feeling thermometer rating and leads to new friends who share that way of life. Furthermore, we have tested whether having greater warmth toward the group in question in the first wave leads to becoming friends with a member of that group in the second wave. In other words, perhaps you are already warm toward evangelicals and, because of that warmth, end up friends with an evangelical. In those cases where we find a significant impact of gaining a friend within a particular group, we find no evidence that the warmth leads to the friendship rather than the other way around.

Our analysis finds strikingly consistent results; there are multiple examples of how religious bridging corresponds to a warmer assessment of the group in question. Gaining an evangelical friend means a more positive evaluation of evangelicals; gaining a nonreligious friend means warmer regard for “people who are not religious.”

While determining the statistical significance of the increase in warm feelings is straightforward, gauging the substantive importance is less so. Upon gaining an evangelical friend, the thermometer score for evangelicals rises by 7 degrees—more than the gap between the initial average rating for evangelicals and the neutral point of 50 degrees. That seems to us like a substantively important rise. The thermometer score for nonreligious people rises 4 degrees—less, but still noteworthy.

Stepping back from the subjective question of whether a 7- or 4-degree gain is big or small, we acknowledge that feeling thermometers are an abstract,
even artificial, indicator. And so when we speak of feelings toward a group as measured by a thermometer, we cannot necessarily conclude that this means that members of these groups will get along. On-the-ground cooperation is much more difficult than saying you feel warm or cold toward one group or another. On the other hand, however, such attempts at cooperation will be smoother if prior opinions about the group are positive rather than negative.

These results for the consequences of religious bridging are compelling evidence that the purported effects of social contact—under the right conditions—are not merely a fuzzy-headed aspiration. Here we have verification that our friends affect how we perceive the religious groups to which our friends belong. (Indeed, the existing research suggests that this phenomenon is not limited to religious groups, but applies to other social categories too, like race, ethnicity, and class.)

In making sense of these results, we must note that someone we have described as a “new friend” may not actually be so new. Instead, it could be that an existing friend has adopted a new religion. Or it could be that the respondent comes to learn of a friend’s previously unknown religion. Neither possibility changes the interpretation of the results, or their importance. Either situation still suggests that knowing someone within a particular religious group means a more-positive assessment of that group in general—whether you have known that someone for a long time or not.

A process by which one becomes friends with someone first, and then comes to know their religion second, is an example of a more-general process by which people come to like one member of an “outgroup” and then generalize their positive feelings to the group as a whole. First, you become friends with someone without being aware that she is a member of the outgroup. As the friendship develops, her outgroupness becomes salient, but by that time you are already friends. From there, it is a short step to concluding that other, perhaps all, members of this particular outgroup are not so bad after all.

Interreligious friendships are a likely candidate for this type of revelation. While there are some exceptions (e.g., ultraorthodox Jews, Sikhs, Old Order Amish), the religious affiliation of most Americans is not obvious from outward appearances. In this respect, interreligious contact is qualitatively different from contact with people of different races and, arguably, of different socioeconomic backgrounds. It is therefore likely that in the early stages of many friendships, neither party’s religious affiliation is salient. However, given the high rate of religious adherence in the United States, it is also likely that friends become aware of one another’s religious affiliation—as suggested by the fact that virtually all respondents to the Faith Matters surveys were able to describe the religion of their five closest friends. From there, it is a small step to recognizing commonality with other members of that friend’s religion.

In America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity, Robert Wuthnow summarizes a series of in-depth interviews with people who have experienced
this inadvertent contact with someone of a different religion. In describing how Americans are exposed to people of different religions, Wuthnow writes:

[The exposure] occurs because a friend happened to belong to another religion, not because the person was actively engaged on a quest for new spiritual experiences. Often this exposure is involuntary (for example, being dictated by being assigned a roommate of a different religion in college) or focuses less on religion and more on sports, music, and other interests. In many instances, it nevertheless broadens a person’s horizons and reinforces the idea that there are valuable things to be learned from other religions.19

Call this the My Friend Al Principle, a corollary of the Aunt Susan Principle. You become friends with Al for, say, your shared affinity for beekeeping. As you get to know Al, you learn that in addition to his regard for apiculture, he is also an evangelical Christian. Prior to learning that, you may have been suspicious of evangelicals. But if your pal Al is an avid beekeeper—just like you—and is also an evangelical, then perhaps evangelicals are not so bad after all.

The My Friend Al Principle has a strong intuition behind it. Indeed, we would have been surprised if gaining a new friend from a particular social group did not lead you to reevaluate members of that group more generally. There is a more-intriguing possibility, however. Can becoming friends with Al the beekeeping evangelical mean a higher regard for people of still other religious backgrounds? Perhaps upon realizing that you can be friends with Al, a member of a religious group you once viewed with suspicion, you come to reevaluate your perception of other religious groups too. Call this a spillover effect.

To find out if spillover occurs, we can once again turn to comparing the same people at two different times. In this case, we examined whether an increase in the overall religious diversity among one’s close friends leads to a more-positive assessment of various religious groups. The more religious groups that are represented among your close friends, the more religious bridging within your friendship network. An evangelical with an evangelical friend does not count as bridging; a Catholic with an evangelical friend does count. Compare that same Catholic to another who has an evangelical friend and a second friend who is not religious. The friendship network of the second is more religiously diverse than that of the first. With such an index of religious bridging, we can again see what happens when change occurs over time.

What happens when someone’s friendship network becomes more religiously diverse? Does more bridging lead to a more-positive assessment of other religious groups, even those that were not added to the friendship network? In other words, can becoming friends with evangelical Al mean

warmer feelings toward Mormons or people without religious faith at all? Is there spillover?20

In a word, the answer is “yes.” We find convincing evidence in favor of a spillover effect. For example, increased religious bridging leads to greater warmth toward “people who are not religious.” The increase is 3 degrees on the feeling thermometer, a modest but non-negligible gain. We also find that greater religious bridging corresponds to an increase in warmth toward Mormons. An increase of one more religiously bridging friendship leads to an increase in warmth toward Mormons of 2 degrees. Again, this is admittedly not a huge gain, but it is a gain nonetheless. The gain is all the more notable because our index of religious diversity does not include Mormons.21 In other words, bridging to friends of other religions corresponds to positive feelings toward two of the most unpopular religious groups in America: the nonreligious and Mormons.

The waters are muddied when we examine whether an increase in bridging leads to more-positive feelings toward Muslims. Recall that one of the categories included in the religious diversity index is someone of a “non-Christian religion,” of which Islam is an example. So it is possible that the increase in religious diversity results from adding a Muslim friend; we are unable to be sure that this is a true spillover effect. With that caveat in mind, we note that more religious diversity within an individual’s social network has an impact on the perception of Muslims that resembles the increase in warmth toward Mormons—roughly 2 degrees.22

As a parallel with our earlier analysis, we also tested for the possibility of reverse causation: whether warmth toward the group at time 1 in question leads to religious bridging at time 2. It does not.

In sum, we have reasonably firm evidence that as people build more religious bridges they become warmer toward people of many different religions, not just those religions represented within their social network. The increases in thermometer ratings are modest, but then the elapsed time between surveys is short. Social networks do not change much over a single year, so it

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20 In testing for a spillover effect, we excluded anyone who gained a friend of the group in question. For example, when looking at attitudes toward evangelicals we exclude those people who had gained an evangelical friend, or who became an evangelical themselves. In other words, we are isolating what happens to your attitudes toward group X when you add a friend of group Y. Any results we find cannot be because you are, or became, a member of group X, nor because you became friends with someone in group X.

21 Since we did not ask specifically about whether our respondents are friends with a Mormon, we are unable to tell whether our respondents gained a Mormon friend in the year between the two waves of the survey.

22 Note, however, that the results for Muslims are tentative because we do not find a statistically significant increase in warmth toward Muslims when we employ relative, rather than absolute, thermometer scores. The direction of the relationship is the same, namely positive, but with relative scores, we cannot rule out the possibility that the increase was due to chance.
is amazing that we find any effects at all. Based on these short-term results, it seems reasonable to expect that, over time, an increase in interpersonal religious bridging will continue to have a similar effect, smoothing tensions among people of different religions.

Furthermore, if we can see the effects of interreligious friendships, and over only a single year at that, it is also reasonable to assume that interreligious marriages have a far more potent effect. The rates of interreligious marriage have increased dramatically over the last century. Rising interreligious marriage almost certainly means rising acceptance for people of other religions, not only among the spouses themselves but also for their extended family members.

These results can also illuminate why some religious groups are viewed unfavorably, specifically Muslims, Buddhists, and Mormons (see Chapter 14 of American Grace for more details). While religious bridging appears to foster more acceptance of all religions that may seem exotic or unusual, there is even greater acceptance when a bridge is built to a member of that specific group. Thus, groups viewed coldly are those with which most Americans have little or no personal exposure. Given the small size of their respective populations, this would help to explain why Muslims and Buddhists are viewed in relatively negative terms. And, when we remember that Mormons have a high degree of religious homogeneity within their own familial and social networks, it also helps to explain why they are perceived negatively as well. All three groups are also concentrated in particular parts of the United States, which further limits the prospects for religious bridging and thus greater acceptance. While greater bridging overall is likely, over the long haul, to boost approval of these groups, we would expect their image problem to disappear even more rapidly as more and more Americans count a Buddhist, a Muslim, or a Mormon among their friends and family.

WHO GOES TO HEAVEN?

Americans, we have seen, affirm that religious diversity is a good thing, and confirm that belief with their religiously diverse social networks. Along with the value they place on religious diversity is a widespread belief that there are many paths to heaven. In the Faith Matters surveys, we asked “Can a person who is not of your faith go to heaven or attain salvation, or not?”23 A whopping 89 percent of Americans believe that heaven is not reserved for those who share their religious faith. Americans are reluctant to claim that

23 We asked this question in both the 2006 and 2007 Faith Matters surveys, and the results are virtually identical. The follow-up question about whether non-Christians can go to heaven, however, was only asked in the 2007 survey. For consistency’s sake, we report the results from the 2007 survey in both Figures 5 and 6. The data from the 2007 survey will be available at the Roper Center Public Opinion Archive at www.ropercenter.uconn.edu.
they have a monopoly on truth. Their hesitation to adopt a “members only” perspective on who goes to heaven illuminates their positive attitude toward religious diversity. It is not just that they have adopted Jefferson’s minimal standard of avoiding picked pockets and broken legs. Rather, they endorse the legitimacy of others’ religious beliefs. Large majorities of even the stricter religious traditions believe in an equal opportunity heaven. Eighty-three percent of evangelicals, for example, say that other religions can bring salvation; eighty-seven percent of black Protestants believe so (see Figure 5).

Wait, a skeptic might reasonably ask, what do people think of when they hear a question about “someone not of your faith”? Are members of the numerically dominant Christian faiths just thinking of other Christians? Are Baptists merely telling us that Methodists can go to heaven, too? If so, their belief that other religions lead to heaven would still be meaningful—disputes among Christians have historically been fierce—but would nonetheless mean something other than the belief that even non-Christians have a place in heaven. If Baptists are thinking of Methodists, that is one thing, but if they are thinking of Muslims, that is quite another.

To determine the limits of Christians’ ecumenism, in 2007, we asked a second question of those who said that people of different religions could go
to heaven.24 “Does that include non-Christians or only Christians?” Before we report the results, we pause to note that Christian scripture does not appear to leave much room for doubt on whether non-Christians can be saved. For example, the New Testament records Jesus as saying that “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”25

Notwithstanding this scriptural injunction (and many more like it), most Americans who belong to Christian faiths told us that they believe non-Christians can go to heaven. Of those who said that people of other faiths could attain salvation, 89 percent of Catholics, 82 percent of mainline Protestants, and 100 percent of Mormons say that salvation extends to non-Christians. The percentages are noticeably lower for black Protestants and evangelicals, at 69 and 65 percent, respectively, but still constitute a clear majority.

We can put the two questions together—can anyone of a different faith go to heaven? Does that include non-Christians?—to determine the overall percentage of members of Christian faiths who believe that non-Christians can go to heaven. As displayed in Figure 6, for Mormons, it is 98 percent; for Catholics, 83 percent; for mainline Protestants, 79 percent; for black Protestants, 62 percent; and for evangelicals, it is 54 percent. Clearly, Mormons,


FIGURE 6
Even When Those Other Religions are Not Christian

People not of my faith, including non-Christians, can go to heaven

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faith Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline Protestant</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Protestant</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Protestant</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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24 This question was asked in the 2007 follow-up survey.
Catholics, and mainline Protestants all have an expansive view of heaven. The numbers are more ambiguous for evangelicals and black Protestants. Once more, we have a glass-half-full versus glass-half-empty conclusion. Glass-half-empty people would point out that these latter two groups are considerably less likely than the other traditions to believe that heaven takes all good people regardless of religion. On the other hand, glass-half-full people would note that, in both groups, a majority see heaven as welcoming non-Christians. Whether the glass is half full or half empty, one cannot deny that a large number of Americans, even in the religious traditions that have historically stressed that theirs is the only way to heaven, instead see many roads to salvation. By any standard, this bodes well for inter-religious relations.

Lest our hypothetical critic be concerned that the Faith Matters surveys have somehow produced idiosyncratic conclusions, other researchers have asked similar questions about Americans’ acceptance of faiths other than their own and found similar results. The most comprehensive of these surveys is a recent study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, which concluded that “most American Christians, including evangelicals, have more than just other Christian denominations in mind when they say that there are many paths to salvation.”26 The Pew results, however, also reveal that, in the eyes of most Christians, not all non-Christian faiths are equally likely to lead to salvation. For example, when asked specifically whether Islam leads to eternal life, only 35 percent of evangelicals agreed.27 Interestingly, in a rare example of divergence from evangelicals, a much higher percentage—58 percent—of black Protestants believe that Islam is a path to heaven, perhaps because the number of black Muslims in America means that many black Protestants are personally acquainted with someone of the Islamic faith.28

A similar picture is painted by a question asked in the 2007 Pew Religious Landscape Survey, whether one’s religion is “the one true faith leading to eternal life.” Once again, only a minority of Americans agree. Only about 40 percent of evangelicals and black Protestants, a little under 20 percent of Catholics, and a little over 10 percent of mainline Protestants believe that theirs is the one true faith.29

27 Evangelicals are also unsure about the eternal prospects for Hindus, Buddhists, atheists, and “people with no religious faith.” No more than 35 percent of evangelicals believe that any of these faiths (or the lack thereof) can lead to eternal life. In general, black Protestants are modestly more likely than evangelicals to believe that these specific groups of non-Christians can achieve eternal life, while mainline Protestants and Catholics are much more likely to believe this.

28 For more on this point, see Darren W. Davis, Negative Liberty: Public Opinion and the Terrorist Attacks on America (New York: Russell Sage, 2007), 210–211.

29 Mormons are the most likely to believe that theirs is the one true faith. Recall from above that they are also the most likely to believe that even people who are not of their faith will go to heaven. This apparent discrepancy can be explained by the distinctively Mormon practice of post-humous baptism. Mormons believe that people can be baptized into the Mormon faith on behalf of their
Still further confirmation of Americans’ ecumenism arises from the studies of “Middletown,” arguably the most studied city in America. In 1977, all high school students in Middletown (Muncie, Indiana) were asked whether they agreed that “Christianity is the one true religion and all people should be converted to it.” Thirty-eight percent agreed—roughly consistent with the more-recent data we have reported above. Because this community was the subject of intensive research by sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd in the 1920s and 1930s, it is possible to make comparisons across the decades. The change is dramatic. When the identical question about Christianity was asked of all Middletown high school students in 1924, 94 percent agreed that Christianity is the one true religion. In other words, over 50 years there was a precipitous decline in the belief that Christianity is the one and only true religion. Significantly, this decline in religious chauvinism came not because of diminishing religiosity. To the contrary, by every possible indicator, Middletowners were far more religious in the late 1970s than in the 1920s.30 These data from Middletown also highlight the generational differences in religious tolerance. Young people today are even more accepting of other religions than are their parents and grandparents. According to the 2007 Faith Matters survey, nearly nine in ten (87 percent) of Christians under age 35 believe that non-Christians can go to heaven, compared to 70 percent of people 65 and older.

The expansive—if not total—ecumenism of Americans is all the more notable in light of what clergy believe. In many faiths, there is a wide gulf between the beliefs of clergy and laity with regard to who is eligible for heaven. We can say this because of a survey conducted by political scientist Corwin Smidt and his colleagues. They asked clergy in different Christian denominations whether they agreed that “there is no way to salvation but through belief in Jesus Christ.”31 In sharp contrast to the ecumenical views of the American public, clergy are far more likely to see a single road to heaven. Even in denominations generally thought to be fairly liberal, a high proportion of clergy endorse belief in Jesus as the sole source of salvation. For example, 63 percent of clergy in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) agree that Jesus is the only way (despite its name, the theology of the ELCA puts it in the mainline Protestant camp). This was also true for 59 percent of United Methodist clergy and 57 percent of clergy from the Presbyterian Church, USA.

ancestors, thus giving them an opportunity to obtain salvation. Therefore, Mormons believe that theirs is the one true faith while simultaneously believing that people not of their faith can go to heaven (because they can be baptized posthumously).

These numbers for mainline Protestants, however, are dwarfed by those from the clergy in evangelical and black Protestant denominations. The statement that salvation comes only through Jesus is endorsed by:

- 100 percent of clergy from the Church of God in Christ, and 98 percent of leaders in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, two historically black denominations.
- 100 percent of clergy from the Presbyterian Church in America (not to be confused with the Presbyterian Church, USA), 98 percent from the Missouri Synod Lutherans, 98 percent from the Church of Christ, 97 percent of Southern Baptist pastors, 96 percent of Christian Reformed leaders, and 92 percent of clergy from nondenominational but evangelical-leaning congregations (that is, megachurches).

Across this range of Christian denominations we see a disconnect between the leaders in the pulpits and the people in the pews. Most Christian clergy see salvation as exclusively Christian, while most Christians have a more—if not completely inclusive—view of who will be saved in the hereafter.

The clergy–laity disconnect was made clear to us more vividly than is possible with a dry statistical report on who believes what. Early in our research for this book, one of us (Putnam) spoke about our work to a group of Lutheran theologians from the Missouri Synod, one of the evangelically inclined denominations within Lutheranism. They were shocked that such a high percentage of Americans believe that there are many ways to get to heaven. One theologian spoke up firmly that those who believe that are simply wrong. And judging from murmurs of approval from the group, he was not alone in his opinion. In an attempt to reconcile this apparent heresy, another member of the audience proposed that, surely, Missouri Synod Lutherans do not take such a casual view toward salvation. What ensued was social science research in real time, as an on-the-spot analysis of the 2006 Faith Matters data stored on Putnam’s laptop revealed that 86 percent of Missouri Synod Lutherans said that a good person who is not of their faith could indeed go to heaven. Upon hearing this news, these theologians were stunned into silence. One wanly said that as teachers of the Word, they had failed.

We claim no qualifications to assess the theological implications of believing in a heaven that is not an exclusive club. The sociological implications of our findings are clear, however. A leading, perhaps even the primary, reason that America manages to be both highly religious and highly religiously diverse is that most Americans do not believe that those with a different religious faith are damned. Devotion plus diversity, minus damnation, equals comity.

The explanation for the fact that so many Americans appear to disregard the theology of their religions rests in the religious bridging within their personal social networks. If you are highly religious, your Aunt Susan and your pal Al both produce a form of cognitive dissonance. You know you are supposed to believe that only people who believe as you do will enter heaven.
However, Susan and Al are both the salt of the earth, and so surely heaven has a place for them. Most Americans, it appears, resolve this discrepancy in favor of believing that Susan and Al can go to heaven after all.

**Who Is a Good American?**

Asking about eligibility for heaven is an important indicator of how Americans view the eternal prospects of those who believe differently than they do, which in turn sheds light on the level of religious tolerance in America. What, though, about tolerance of the irreligious? And what if we ask not about the hereafter, but the here and now? Do Americans think that being religious is a prerequisite for being a “good American”?

There are many reasons to think that they do. Americans have long merged patriotism and religion, as evidenced by the vestigial examples of religious symbolism at many moments of nationalistic ceremony. Examples of America’s civil religion, discussed above, only reinforce the symbiosis between God and country. Since the 1950s, the Pledge of Allegiance has contained the words “under God.” Similarly, this was the decade when “In God We Trust” was first inscribed on American paper currency. It was in the 1950s that public monuments with the Ten Commandments were placed all around the country. During this period of conflict with an expansionist and officially atheist Soviet Union, these public expressions of religion reminded Americans that theirs was a godly nation facing a godless foe. More recently, in the immediate wake of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, members of Congress from both parties linked arms on the steps of the Capitol and sang not the National Anthem but “God Bless America.”

Even though religion and patriotism seemingly fit hand in glove, the 2006 Faith Matters survey reveals that Americans are nonetheless willing to include people who are not religious in their conception of an upstanding citizen. Eighty-seven percent of Americans agree that people “without a religious faith” can be “good Americans.” So, in spite of Americans’ own high degree of religiosity, and the enduring legacy of America’s civil religion, the nonreligious are welcomed as full members of the national community. Interestingly, this is nearly the same percentage of Americans (89 percent) who believe that people of a different faith can go to heaven.

We see a further parallel between religious tolerance and the acceptance of the nonreligious as full Americans. If interreligious relations are enhanced by religious bridging, it seems reasonable to think that religious bridging would also lead people to accept the patriotic bona fides of people without religious faith. In other words, just as we found that an increase in religious bridging corresponds to warmer feelings toward religious outgroups, we might expect more bridging to lead to the full acceptance of an outgroup—those without a religion—into the national community. This is a high bar to clear, since so many of our respondents had already told us that even the nonreligious could
be good Americans. Just as a helium-filled balloon cannot ascend any higher than the ceiling, so is there a ceiling expanding on the acceptance of the non-religious as good citizens.

Although a high percentage of Americans already see secularists as patriots, this percentage climbs higher with more religious bridging. That is, when we use the same test we described above—testing the impact of increasing religious diversity among one’s friends over roughly a one-year time span—we see that more bridging means a small but statistically significant increase in the likelihood of agreeing that religious faith is not essential to good Americanness.

This finding suggests that interreligious contact can lead to a redefined social boundary. Rather than being dismissed as unpatriotic, people without a religious faith are instead viewed as full-fledged members of the national community. In other words, having a religiously diverse group of friends seems to lead to widening the circle of “we.” E pluribus unum.

THE LESS-TOLERANT TENTH: A MINORITY OF “TRUE BELIEVERS”

The vast majority of Americans seem entirely comfortable in a religiously pluralist world, but several indicators point to a small minority (roughly one in 10 of all adults) who are “true believers.” As we have seen, 11 percent of believers say that people of other faiths cannot reach heaven. Similarly, as Figure 7 shows, approximately 13 percent of all adults say that “one religion is true and others are not.”

It is worth looking more closely at this group, especially since they seem to represent the worst fears of secular Americans. In many respects, those Americans who say there is only “one true religion” are distinctive, even compared to highly religious evangelicals. (Table 1 summarizes the statistical evidence.)

First, even in an America that is more religiously observant than any other advanced nation, this group of true believers is yet more intensely religious. They are, virtually without exception, absolutely sure about God’s existence. Religion is fundamental to their personal identity and daily life. They are twice as likely as other Americans to attend church every week (many of them more

32 Only people who in response to an earlier question said that they believe in life after death were asked the question about who goes to heaven (89 percent of the American population). Of those, 1 percent said that they do not believe in heaven or salvation. We asked everyone about whether there is truth in one or many religions, but we also allowed respondents to indicate that “there is very little truth in any religion”—6.7 percent chose that option. Interestingly, this is lower than the percentage that does not claim a religious affiliation for themselves. Responses to these two questions are reasonably, but not perfectly, correlated ($r = .30$). We use the question about “one true religion” for identifying true believers, rather than the question about heaven, because the former made sense to nearly everyone.

33 Table 1 represents only the bivariate relationship between “true believer” and various other traits. In every case, however, that correlation remains strong and highly significant, even with controls for identification with the evangelical Protestant tradition.
than once). And because they are passionate about their faith, they are much more active in personal evangelism, sharply dissenting from the more common view among other Americans that in terms of religion “everyone should leave everyone else alone.”

Second, compared to most Americans, they have a very clear, religiously derived sense of good and evil. Whereas 80 percent of other Americans say they follow their own conscience in matters of right and wrong, more than half of the “true believers” give precedence instead to religious leaders and teachings. They are roughly twice as likely as other Americans to be strict biblical literalists, to be certain about the reality of hell, to anticipate Judgment Day any time now, and to be wary of sin and evil in everyday life. Not surprisingly, they think that obedience, rather than self-reliance, is the cardinal virtue to be imparted to children. They are, in short, moral absolutists.

Third, religious true believers in America today are deeply conservative, especially on moral issues, above all on questions of sexual morality. They wholeheartedly condemn premarital sex and homosexuality, at a time when most other Americans are coming to terms with those two sexual revolutions. They overwhelmingly oppose abortion, one third favoring a legal ban even in the case of rape and incest. They are more than twice as likely as other

Americans to condemn gambling as “always morally wrong.” It is hardly surprising that most true believers describe themselves as “conservative,” 32 percent as “very conservative,” compared to only 10 percent of other Americans who say they are “very conservative.”

Fourth, true believers are (compared to other Americans) somewhat less comfortable with religious pluralism and with the idea that religion and morality are primarily private and personal matters. They are less convinced...
that religious diversity is a good thing, and probably for that reason, they are more bothered by an alien religion, even one as mild-mannered as Buddhism. (True believers are half again as likely to object to the construction of a Buddhist temple in their community, 33 percent to 21 percent for other Americans.) They feel that their own values are especially threatened by the modern world, and they are somewhat more ready to rid library collections of unpopular books. They are slightly less trusting of other people, drawing an especially sharp distinction between deeply religious people (whom they trust) and nonreligious people (whom they do not). To be sure, even these true believers have been visibly influenced by the American tradition of religious and civil toleration, and on all these indicators, a substantial number join the national consensus in favor of pluralism and tolerance, but that consensus is narrower among this less-tolerant tenth of the population.

Finally and most significantly, these true believers live in more religiously monochromatic social environments. They are less likely to have married outside their faith, and they are much more insistent than other Americans that their children remain inside that faith. (If it is, as they believe, the one true faith, that is hardly surprising.) They are less likely than are other Americans to have ties of kinship or friendship outside their own faith. In short, true believers are much less likely to have an Aunt Susan or pal Al to perturb their unquestioning faith.

The vast majority of Americans belong to religions (above all, Christianity) that claim unique status as the one true religion. Most of us recite creeds that embody that claim. From a sociological point of view, however, what is remarkable is how few of us really are “true believers” in this sense. For these few Americans, religious faith is serious enough to suggest fanaticism, and Figure 8 shows how they are distributed among our major religious traditions. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, they are somewhat more common among religious traditions (especially the Mormon and evangelical traditions, both black and white) that are more sect-like, using nomenclature introduced by Max Weber and recently revived by Laurence Iannaccone, Roger Finke, and Rodney Stark, among other scholars.34 Otherwise, in their age, gender, education, region, and other demographic traits, true believers seem a perfect mirror of America. Moreover, the incidence of true believers seems to be highly stable over time, since the responses represented in Figure 8 are virtually identical to

responses to the same question in the General Social Surveys of 1988 and 2008. This hard-core, deeply moralistic less-tolerant tenth of the population gives us a glimpse of what a highly religious America might look like without Aunt Susan and my pal Al.

In today’s America, however, true believers constitute only a small fraction of the faithful in every religious tradition. More specifically, while a majority (52 percent) of true believers as identified here are evangelicals, the great majority (75 percent) of evangelicals are not true believers. “Faith without fanaticism” accurately describes most Americans.

**CONSEQUENCES OF BRIDGING**

Multiple strands of evidence point in the same direction. When Americans associate with people of religions other than their own—or people with no religion at all—they become more accepting of other religions. Religious intermarriage is perhaps the most profound example. Over the course of the last century, there has been a steady rise in the frequency of marriage across religious lines, which, we argue, is closely tied to the widespread ecumenism within the American population. Husbands and wives are presumably willing to believe that the other can go to heaven (Who would marry someone on their way to hell?), even if they have different religions. However, this first-order effect is not the only way that interreligious marriage can affect
interreligious relations. Second-order effects ripple through an extended family. Even if you and your own spouse do not have different religious backgrounds, most Americans have an Aunt Susan in the family.

Religious bridging is not limited to intermarriage. Interfaith friendship is even more common than marriages across religious boundaries. Most Americans have at least one close friend of another religion, and many have multiple friends of other faiths. Even over a short period of time, we have seen that a small increase in such religious bridging corresponds to warmer feelings toward at least two relatively unpopular religious groups (Mormons and the nonreligious). Furthermore, we have seen that religious bridging can expand Americans’ sense of who is fully a member of the national community.

Individually, each of these findings and observations might be considered intriguing. Taken together, they form a convincing pattern. Interreligious mixing, mingling, and marrying have kept America’s religious melting pot from boiling over.

CONCLUSION

We began with a puzzle. How can Americans combine high levels of both religious diversity and devotion? America’s religious comity is even more puzzling, given the recent state of religious polarization. In the wake of the sexually liberal sixties, conservative religion grew in both size and prominence—including political prominence. And then, in response to that growth and presence in partisan politics, there has been a second backlash, in which increasing numbers of Americans, especially young people, have turned away from religion. These seismic events have reverberated throughout American society, and so the moderate religious middle—a once-thriving segment of the religious spectrum—has shrunk.

Given this state of affairs, there would appear to be considerable potential for religious tension. As we have seen, religious and secular Americans have differing worldviews, and see each other in starkly different terms. There are also latent tensions between members of some religious traditions, while some religions are viewed negatively across the board. Furthermore, history provides many examples of such tension turning to violence. For example, in 1834, anti-Catholic riots in Charlestown, Massachusetts, destroyed the Ursuline convent; in 1844, there were deadly riots in Philadelphia over rumors that Catholics were going to remove the Bible from the public schools. Nor are Catholics the only group to face such animus. In the face of growing hostilities between Mormons and non-Mormons, in 1838, the governor of

Missouri issued an order that all Mormons were to leave his state or be killed. This extermination order actually remained on the books until 1976.36

Such examples of religiously inspired violence are tragic, but fortunately, they also are rare. America has had sporadic religious riots, but no sustained religious wars. From its founding, America has had religious toleration encoded in its national DNA. In saying this, we must recognize that at the time of the founding, magnanimity toward different religions was limited to various Protestant sects; Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and certainly atheists were not included. Nonetheless, the early years of the Republic were informed by John Locke’s conception of religious toleration. Locke spoke of the “necessity and advantage” of religious toleration, justifying it as a means of keeping the civil peace. From Locke, it is a small step to Thomas Jefferson’s acceptance of different faiths as long as they did not infringe on his freedoms.

Over time, however, that minimal conception of toleration on practical grounds has evolved into an explicit embrace of religious diversity for its own sake. There were bumps in the road along the way, as evidenced by outbreaks of anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism, anti-Mormonism, and any number of other anti-isms. Eventually, though, the national sentiment moved from grudging acceptance of other faiths to a way station of tacit approval to an outright embrace of religious differences as ecumenism took hold in the mid-to late-twentieth century. And even if the religious diversity of today is not completely inclusive, it still is far more expansive than anything imagined by the Founders. Catholics are squarely in the American mainstream, while Jews are the best-liked religious group in the country. Religious pluralism is embraced, as shown by the extremely high percentage of Americans who say such diversity is good for the country.

In tracing the evolution and expansion of religious pluralism, we acknowledge the important role of the nation’s constitutional infrastructure. The U.S. Constitution’s prohibitions on both an established religion—which eventually came to mean any public support for religious entities by government at any level—and religious tests for public office helped to create a flourishing religious ecosphere. In a never-ending process, many different variants of religion emerge, adapt, evolve, and innovate. In America, religion is not static, but fluid. Not only are religions changing, but individual Americans themselves frequently undergo religious change—finding religion, dropping out of religion, or switching from one religion to another.

This fluidity has contributed to the steady growth of interreligious mingling and marrying. Geographic segregation by religion has largely ended, while social segregation along religious lines is also mostly a thing of the past. As Americans have come to live by, make friends with, and wed people of other

religions, their overlapping social relationships have made it difficult to sustain interreligious hostility. While not every religion escapes hostility, interreligious tensions are far more muted today than in the America of yesterday or in many other nations today.

How has America solved the puzzle of religious pluralism—the coexistence of religious diversity and devotion? And how has it done so in the wake of growing religious polarization? By creating a web of interlocking personal relationships among people of many different faiths.

This is America’s grace.*

*This article is adapted from Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2010).