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Religion's role in politics provokes brewing backlash

by NCR Editorial Staff

PBS broadcast a six-part documentary series earlier this month titled "God in America." It comes from the award-winning producers of "American Experience" and "Frontline." (Full episodes are available for free online at PBS.org.) A review of the series in Religion News Service called the show "an intense exploration of the complex dynamics that animate a nation that is both deeply religious yet without an official religion."

Director David Belton, a British native, told Religion News Service that working on the documentary caused a significant shift in his view of American life. "It affected me quite a lot. I'd studied American politics in college. I think I suddenly realized how little I did understand about America. ... Now a lot of things in America make sense."

The series examines how the country's roots in religious liberty influenced its development of courts and its political system and how religious ideas shaped reform movements.

Belton said that Americans don't seem to understand that it is their "extraordinary religious heritage that informs everything [the nation] does."

Now scholars Robert D. Putnam, a professor of public policy at Harvard University, and David E. Campbell, a professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame, are telling us that the warp and woof of religion and politics is being torn apart.

In their new book, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, they tie a well-documented sudden jump in disaffection for organized religion among young adults to organized religion's increasing involvement in conservative politics.

About their research, Putman and Campbell recently wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*, "Some Americans

brought their religion and their politics into alignment by adjusting their political views to their religious faith. But, surprisingly, more of them adjusted their religion to fit their politics. We were initially skeptical about that proposition, because it seemed implausible. ... But the evidence convinced us that many Americans now are sorting themselves out on Sunday morning on the basis of their political views.?

In the new century, Putnam and Campbell write, "the increasingly prominent association between religion and conservative politics provoked a backlash among moderates and progressives, many of whom had previously considered themselves religious. ... This backlash was especially forceful among youth coming of age in the 1990s and just forming their views about religion.

"Increasingly, young people saw religion as intolerant, hypocritical, judgmental and homophobic. If being religious entailed political conservatism, they concluded, religion was not for them," Putnam and Campbell write.

Who can predict what the absence of the millennials, the 20-somethings, from organized religions will mean for those religions in the future? Religionists who favor a more faithful, albeit smaller, congregation may welcome the trend.

But also, who can predict what will happen to American politics with the absence of religion? Given the germinal influence of religion in America's political life, documented by "God in America," one has to wonder if we might be seeing a major shift in the foundation of American politics.

These trends might herald the beginning of a European-style secularism in American life.

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