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Robert Wuthnow: Inventing American Religion

Claude S. Fischer¹ 

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There is, as Robert Wuthnow notes in his *Inventing American Religion: Polls, Surveys, and the Tenuous Quest for a Nation's Faith*, a striking consonance between American Protestant understandings of religion and the presumptions of public opinion polling: that individuals hold a set of distinct beliefs, even a philosophy, which each one has personally developed, thoughtfully deliberated, and can declaim. Religions in the form of, say, group practices with thin theologies or syncretistic notions of the supernatural are largely left out by questions such as whether one believes in God, yes or no, or how often one attends services, weekly, monthly, or less often. To assert that polling *invented* American religion is clearly a publisher's hyperbole. But Wuthnow's real claim, that polling "has influenced—and at times distorted—how religion is understood" by the media, religious leaders, scholars, and "practitioners" (p. 13) is much more persuasive.

Wuthnow tracks the arc of survey research's rise and decline: starting with needs-assessment canvassing by welfare agencies in the early twentieth century; formative semi-scientific polling in the inter-war years, particularly by George Gallup, that drew attention to itself through election predictions and occasional questions about faith; sophisticated surveys of the postwar years (many of them explicitly addressing religious topics in the work of pioneers like Glock, Lenski, and Greeley); and closing with the falling response rates, rising public distrust of polls, and increasingly sharp methodological critiques of the current period.

Throughout this trajectory, survey research intertwined with religious institutions, individuals, and issues. From the 1896 canvasses by the New York Federation of Churches through *Middletown* to B'nai Brith-sponsored work on Christian

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antisemitism, and beyond, religious organizations heavily produced and consumed survey research. That George Gallup, Jr., and J. Howard Pew were committed Christians shaped survey organizations' agendas. Many hotly debated religious concerns of the last century or so—and here is a central theme for Wuthnow—arose from, were framed by, and were presumably answered by survey questions. I refer to concerns such as whether Americans “believe in God,” religiosity in decline, and what is an evangelical. The current attention to the increasing percentage of “Nones,” to take another example, can be seen as the product of a survey question which presumes that individuals “have” one of five clear, singular, identifiable, stable, and reportable religions.

As to the connection between survey questions and lived nature of American religion, the causality probably runs the other way. Individually-tailored theology has been around for long, helping propel the nineteenth-century flurry of new sects. Today's polling on “spiritual but not religious” followed rather than created the popularity of that label. Still, Wuthnow has a point that the media and scholars too often reify the often arbitrary terms of survey research. There are no “Nones,” even “liminal” ones per Putnam and Campbell; there are people who in a particular study choose that answer out of a set of options presented to them by a researcher.

Surveys are problematic for studying the complexity of religious thought and much more of religious practice, Wuthnow argues, endorsing the critiques of scholars such as Peter Berger and Robert Bellah. Point granted. But if we are to address key questions in the study of popular religion—folk beliefs, trends in practice, syncretism, differences between faith traditions, support for institutions, the social foundations of adherence, and so on—survey research, even flawed and failing, it is a necessary tool. Wuthnow himself uses it. But we can use it better by being sensitized to its problems, as Wuthnow urges.

Inventing American Religion is, as Wuthnow's many books typically are, engaging, insightful, and topical. It provides a handy history of the survey enterprise; it preaches modesty for survey practitioners; and it reminds us again that surveys and theologies are social constructions.