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Review of Robert Wuthnow, *Inventing American Religion: Polls, Surveys, and the Tenuous Quest for a Nation's Faith* (2015)

Robert Wuthnow's *Inventing American Religion* is a fascinating history of polls and surveys of religious life in the United States. Focused on present-day implications, Wuthnow cautions those citing polls to consider the data's source, and he prescribes a set of best practices for scholars conducting studies of American religion. Like Sarah Igo's *The Averaged American* (2007), Wuthnow's book demonstrates the constructive power of ostensibly descriptive tools. Basic decisions about sampling procedures and the wording of survey questions have shaped contemporary understandings of American religion and made certain kinds of religiosity more legible than others. Written at a level for advanced undergraduates and early-career graduate students, the book works well in courses on methodology and contemporary American religion. (Full disclosure: I have road-tested it in both.) That Wuthnow sometimes pulls his punches and intimates his harshest criticisms means that readers and instructors must amplify his soft-spoken advice and concerns, but these qualities also make the book rich for close reading and discussion.

Inventing American Religion follows a mostly chronological narrative to show how polling's past—and especially its origins—have influenced its present. The second chapter focuses on the social survey movement, which emerged in the 1890s and included efforts like W.E.B. Du Bois' surveys of urban neighborhoods in Philadelphia and Charles Stelzle's similar efforts in St. Louis and Chicago. Stelzle, like Reverend Walter Laidlaw before him, hoped that knowledge gained from surveys could help build relationships between churches and the working class. For decades, churches were the primary sponsors of religion-focused surveys because they were the financial backers most interested in knowledge about religion.

Other sources for surveys emerged with scientific public opinion polling in the 1930s (Chapter 3), and eventually, with a range of academic surveys based at universities (Chapter 4). New aims like societal health and psychological well-being did not mean the end of Christian influence on the social scientific study of religion. Transmitted via the tacit norms and assumptions of researchers, church interests continued to echo in the wording of survey questions long after churches ceased to be primary funders. Pollsters were often more explicit about their concern for America's soul. Chapters 5 and 6 take aim at agencies like Gallup, Inc. and the Barna Group, which conduct national opinion polls on hasty timelines with results that are ready for media sound bites. Providing an overview of organizational histories and the biographies of agency founders like George Barna, Wuthnow shows the role that Protestant

evangelicals have played in polling American religion, and in turn, how evangelical Christianity has become an object of national interest. Research on the role of polling in the formation of a public's self-understanding is a welcome complement to the recent work of Daniel Vaca (forthcoming) and Matthew Hedstrom (2013), who investigate how publishers constructed evangelical and spiritual publics to whom they could sell books.

The Pew Research Center figures strangely in this story, and Wuthnow backs away from any strong assertions about the quality of its polls. He describes the transformation of Pew Charitable Trusts from its narrow focus on evangelical causes to far broader interests in the arts, conservation, and support for education. Pew Research grew out of the Trusts' expanded mission in the mid-1990s, and now, as Wuthnow observes (148), Pew receives far more media mentions and academic citations than the General Social Survey (GSS). By concluding his section on Pew with a scathing quote about polling from GSS-advocate Darren Sherkat (149), Wuthnow seems to ventriloquize a more vocal critic. Telling is Wuthnow's persistent use of the term "polls" rather than "surveys" to describe Pew's results. In the book's introduction, he observes a difference between polls and surveys that he attributes to mid-century "academicians" wanting to distinguish themselves from pollsters (10). Despite this narrative distance, he adopts the poll/survey distinction throughout the book. Pew Research conducts polls; the GSS is a survey.

Chapter 7 presents the results of interviews with more than a hundred religious leaders about what they think of polls. The chapter is an odd fit in a book that observes, not always approvingly, the religious roots of polling, and which ultimately puts more trust in university-based surveys like the GSS. It is not obvious how religious leaders might stand in for the broader American public and its perspective on polls and surveys, yet the chapter focuses on how confidence in polling could affect its future role in American life.

The book's final chapter offers clear and helpful diagnoses of problems faced by those conducting polls and surveys, such as low response rates, the fluidity of religious identities, and the inadequacy of categories. Wuthnow provides researchers with solutions that respond to these challenges, and he urges, above all, the use of qualitative interviews and field research to inform and supplement quantitative surveys—a mixed methods approach that he pioneered in seminal studies like *The Restructuring of American Religion* (1988). Wuthnow's analysis and suggestions are excellent and practical, and they largely preserve the survey in its present form as a tool for knowledge production.

Despite its on-trend embrace of a gerund in its title and the thoroughly constructivist approach that this signals, *Inventing American Religion* does not engage with the critical theories that have radically reshaped the anthropology of religion and the discipline of Religious Studies in recent years. Attention to performativity, latent norms, and the prescriptions inherent in description are hallmarks of the Asadian critique of both religion (1993) and secularism (2003). Fitzgerald (2003) and McCutcheon (2003) have dedicated much of their careers to demonstrating the contingency of religion's construction and the colonial interests it often serves. They and others like Nongbri (2013) have also shown how Christian assumptions linger

in the scholarly use of religion and its related categories. American religion is not exceptional, and its “invention” provides a good opportunity to bridge the gap that separates the work of atheoretical sociologists of religion from those who have taken the extreme position that the category of religion ought to be abandoned. Wuthnow’s oeuvre reflects deep knowledge of critical theory, and his reputation and ability to circulate across disciplines would assure a generous hearing. He is in a unique position to suture these rifts, and work that does so remains sorely needed.

Less glaringly absent is a broader discussion of the role of polling as a performative description. Economic sociologists like MacKenzie, Muniesa, and Callon (2007) have shown how economic markets conform to models that describe them when market actors buy in to those descriptions. Wuthnow provides good examples of how a similarly reciprocal process is at work among pollsters, the media that disseminate their results, and the Americans who digest them. Yet *Inventing American Religion* eschews any attempt to build a theory of polling as performance. Given the growing power of organizations like the Pew Research Center, scholars and journalists would do well to look closely at its questionnaires and sampling procedures and ask what kind of future it performs when a surplus category like the “nones” describes nearly a quarter of Americans. In other words, what does a failed model perform? Though likely out of fashion, Baudrillard’s work on the auto-spectatorship of polling and the masses (1985) can teach us a great deal about the American self that polling invents and circulates via increasingly social media.

Wuthnow’s eminence in the field makes him a perspicacious guide through the history of polls and surveys, as well as a powerful critic. That eminence also makes it difficult for him to tell his own important role in the evolution of American religion and the invention of rigorous methods for knowing it. Another author would no doubt cite him far more often than he does himself, and given his prolific output of high-quality, often prescient volumes on religious life in the United States, he certainly deserves a more prominent place in the history of attempts to poll and survey it. The text he has given us is clearly written and avoids technical jargon, explaining survey methods and analysis in a way that provides access to undergraduates and humanists. *Inventing American Religion* offers sober insight into the production of knowledge about religious life in the United States, and it should be required reading for anyone making use of polls and surveys.