

*Growing Up Religious*, by Robert Wuthnow

reviewed by [Jackson W. Carroll](#) in the [September 8, 1999](#) issue

American religious life is in ferment, not decline. The changes range from the increasing religious diversity brought by new immigrant groups, through the ebbing importance of denominations, to the impact of large, often independent megachurches on the worship, music styles and ministries of all kinds of churches. No one has helped us understand this ferment better than Robert Wuthnow.

Through his many books, Wuthnow has charted, among other things, the restructuring of American religion; the small-group explosion (which is both creating social capital and reshaping our experience of God from transcendence to immanence); the moral dimensions of work, business and money; and changing patterns of spirituality. He is chiefly interested in cultural transformation. His books explore how culture is produced through social relationships and practices, and how it is institutionalized. Although Wuthnow's work is grounded in sophisticated theories of culture and religion, it is highly accessible because he fleshes out survey data and theory with the stories of the people he has interviewed.

Wuthnow's latest book is especially rich in stories. He asked a sample of ordinary Americans to reflect on their early religious experiences and on their present practices. Eschewing abstract theories of socialization, he argues that religious formation takes place primarily "through embedded practices; that is, through specific, deliberate religious activities that are firmly intertwined with the daily habits of family routines, of eating and sleeping, of having conversations, of adorning the spaces in which people live, of celebrating the holidays, and of being part of a community." Though formal religious education is important, it "pales in significance" when compared with these socially embedded practices.

Wuthnow draws on the work of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and of church historian Dorothy Bass, who with her Valparaiso University colleagues is exploring the place of intentional spiritual practices in people's faith formation—also the focus of one of Wuthnow's chapters. But Wuthnow is primarily concerned with the wide range of ordinary, everyday religious practices: prayers at meal and bedtimes, Bible reading, and even such mundane activities as shining one's shoes before going to

church or synagogue. Religious nurture is most effective when such ordinary practices are joined with congregational life and deliberate formation.

Individual faith journeys are rarely static, of course. People move on, sometimes away from religion altogether, sometimes back to it, sometimes to traditions and practices substantially different from those in which they were raised. And sometimes to a deeper, more mature faith that includes the intentional practice of spiritual disciplines.

Heightened mobility, increased choice and growing multiculturalism are among the changes eroding traditional patterns of spirituality and religious socialization. In a previous book—*After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*—Wuthnow characterized this change as a shift from a "spirituality of dwelling" embedded in settled, local communities, sacred places and habitual practices to a fluid and portable "spirituality of seeking." This shift, as the present volume makes clear, is affecting the religious nurture of children and youth. But though there is less "intense, communal, and familial involvement in a single tradition," Wuthnow is cautiously optimistic that people will continue "to be raised with a sense that it is special to grow up in a religious tradition and believing that there is value in praying and learning to serve others."

Wuthnow emphasizes the ways in which memories of events, traditions and people continue to shape our lives. Remembering is a way of connecting with the people and practices that have formed our values and beliefs. As we remember, we claim or, at times, differentiate ourselves from our past. Through deliberately and reflectively remembering—the process of anamnesis, which Wuthnow reminds us is an antidote to amnesia—the past becomes present to us and shapes the way we understand and interpret our lives.

One does not, however, live only by looking backward. One must also look ahead, and it is this reflective double vision that protects us from both nostalgic glorification of the past and the kind of single-minded focus on the present that is a disease of our throwaway society. Reading Wuthnow's book engaged me in remembering and reflecting on how my own religious upbringing shaped—and continues to shape—who I am. Inviting this kind of existential engagement is a mark of a good book.

Though I would have welcomed more theory to accompany the stories and more of an indication of the number of people who fall into the various categories and

subgroups Wuthnow discusses, this book again demonstrates his capacity to make sense of the current religious ferment in an engaging, provocative and highly accessible way.