

THE INTERVIEW

Faith in Numbers

This researcher is measuring the changing religious and political landscape in America

ROBERT P. JONES is the founder of the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) in Washington, D.C., and won the 2019 Grawemeyer Award in Religion for his book *The End of White Christian America*. He spoke with Alicia von Stamwitz about the “three-stranded rope” of party, religion and race in a volatile American landscape.

ALICIA VON STAMWITZ: What inspired you to found the Public Religion Research Institute?

ROBERT JONES: I was a math and computer science undergraduate who went to seminary, so I’ve always had this interest in quantitative analysis and religion. After getting my PhD in religion, I taught for a few years at Missouri State University, but I wanted to do more work on the ground. I wanted to be part of the real-time religious conversation and track changing attitudes on a range of issues that are connected to religious belief and world view.

AVS: You write in the book that feelings of vulnerability and nostalgia among some U.S. voters are fueling political tension.

RJ: The U.S. religious landscape has gone through an enormous amount of change in the last two decades. I

argue that what we have thought of historically as “values voters” in the United States — essentially white evangelical voters who are mostly conservative and Republican — can be more accurately described as “nostalgia voters.”

If you go back just to 2008, the beginning of Barack Obama’s presidency, the United States was 54 percent white and Christian. Our latest data from 2017 has that number at 42 percent. This group has been decentred, which has caused members a great deal of anxiety. They were used to being in the centre and calling the shots.

AVS: How has that changed political attitudes?

RJ: The country has sorted itself along lines of what can be described as a negative partisanship. It’s not so much that each side loves its own team: it’s that they hate the other team.

AVS: Does race figure into this picture?

RJ: Yes. Party, religion and race are three very powerful and visceral human tribal markers, all cutting in the same direction, and it’s really hard to untie that three-stranded rope. Ten years ago, you could not sort the country by race, religion and party the way you can now. Today, the Democratic party is only about three-in-10 white and

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Christian. The Republican party is seven-in-10 white and Christian.

AVS: Why has immigration become a hot-button issue?

RJ: Immigration has come to the fore because it's a very clear way of thinking about the country as a whole. We saw it in the last election with the slogan "Make America great again." It's that last word that is doing all the work in that slogan, hearkening back to a golden era. At the heart of this slogan are the really big questions: Who gets to be an American? What should the country look like?

Right after Barack Obama was re-elected, the Christian Coalition sent around a black-and-white photo of a white family around the kitchen table with really apocalyptic language about the country that we had lost. The email ended with this rhetoric that was so off the scale: "We need to pray to our Heavenly Father to protect us from those enemies without and within who want to see America destroyed." And with the image of the white family at prayer at the top!

AVS: Are there parallels to the American experience in other parts of the world?

RJ: Absolutely. But what's unique about the American context is that one-quarter of the population in the United States claims no religious affiliation at all, and that raises eyebrows here. If I were to conduct a study in Great Britain and a quarter of the country claimed no religious affiliation, that would make headlines because nobody would believe that three-quarters of the country was affiliated with any religion.

That said, among young Americans the number of religiously disaffiliated is 40 percent

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Perspective

and that's something the United States has never seen before. Older white Christians are experiencing an awakening as they look at their children and see less church affiliation, as they go to weddings that are not held in churches, as they see that their grandchildren are no longer being christened or baptized.

AVS: Is there a fix or a way to close the divide?

RJ: Leadership really matters when we have these moments, and I think pastors have a very important role to play. They can either fan the flames or help people take a step back. They can provide a space that helps people frame the larger questions. What is the country really about? What is it that holds us together? Is it the fact that we think of ourselves as a Christian country, or that we think of ourselves as a place of religious freedom where people of all faiths — or none — can come together and find a place at the table?

AVS: Can you point to any specific models?

RJ: We have a nascent interfaith movement happening in the country. People who are shoulder-to-shoulder building homes for needy families, doing service projects together, or feeding the hungry and bringing their full diverse selves to the table. Some organizations are doing this very intentionally across lines of religious difference. I think that's super important.

But there's still a lot of work to do. Most white Christian churches have never done serious work to mend the rift between white and Black churches in America. There are some signs of hope, though. A pair of First Baptist churches in Macon, Ga. — one predominantly Black, the other white — has started to build some bridges to bring the congregations back into communion with one another. Before the Civil War, they were one church. But for 150 years, they basically sat on opposite corners and ignored each other.

AVS: What do you hope to achieve through your writing and lectures?

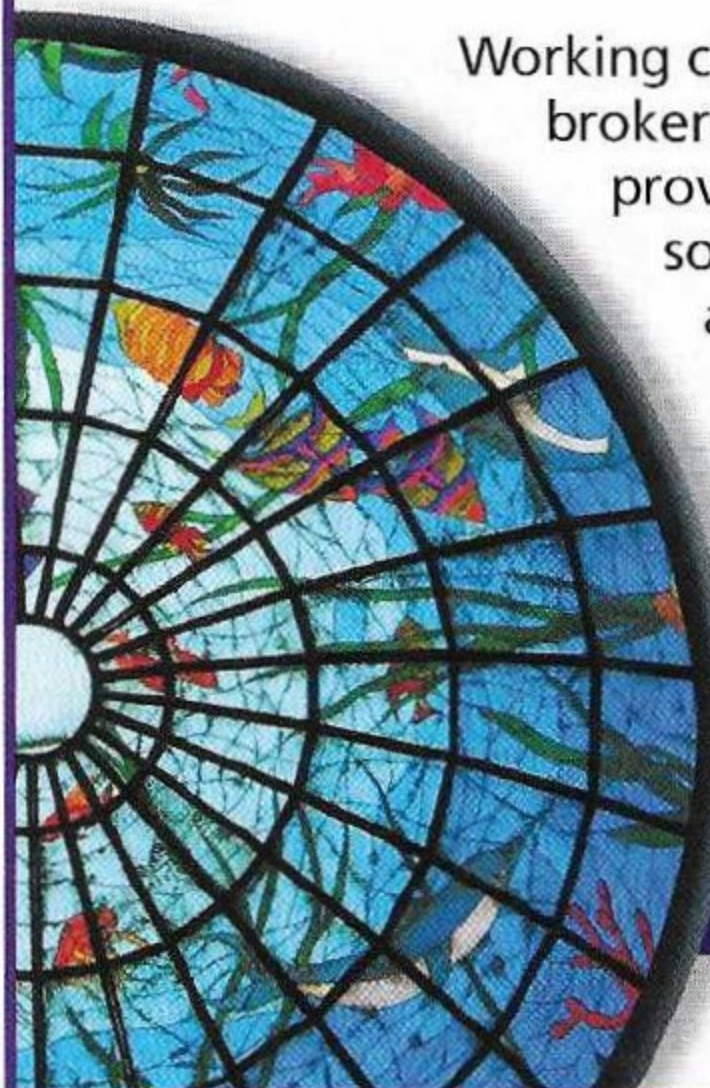
RJ: When I speak to audiences that are left of centre or progressive, I try to foster a greater sense of empathy. I point out that we actually are going through dramatic and rapid changes in our country. Walls and systems are breaking down. It's not that people on the other side are making things up, or making something out of nothing. We are experiencing massive changes culturally, religiously and racially — and the visceral voices and lack of civility reflect the chaos of the political landscape. The task now is to weather this storm and come out in a place where we still have enough holding us together to rebuild. **Ⓜ**

This interview has been edited and condensed.

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