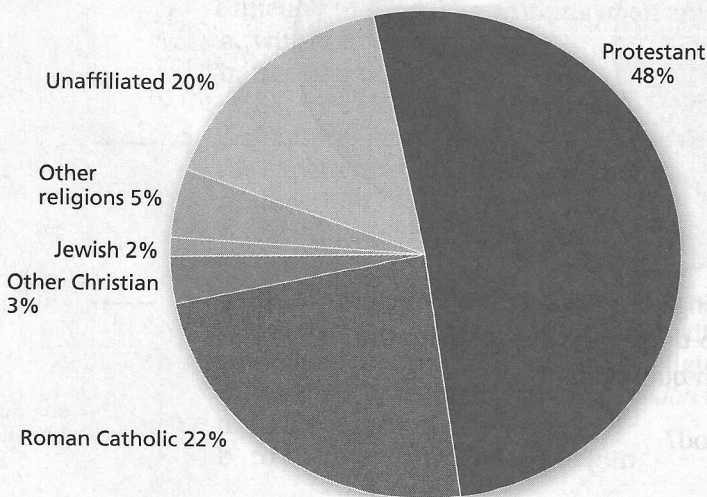


THE RELIGIOUS HERITAGE OF THE UNITED STATES: STRENGTHENING AMERICAN CULTURAL VALUES

1 The United States is and has always been a religious nation, by a number of measures. Ninety percent of Americans still say they believe in God, or a higher power/universal spirit, although their beliefs and practices are quite diverse. The majority of Americans are Christian, but all the major religions of the world are practiced in the United States. In some parts of the country, large numbers of people belong to churches and many attend worship services more than once a week. Other areas are more secular, with fewer people who are active in churches. Increasingly, young people do not belong to any church or other religious group, but most still say they believe in God. Many refer to themselves as being “spiritual,” not “religious.”

RELIGIOUS PREFERENCES IN THE UNITED STATES



2 The landscape of religion in America is complicated and constantly changing, but it has always been a very important aspect of the culture. In Chapter 2 we introduced six basic cultural values—individual freedom, self-reliance, equality

of opportunity, competition, material wealth, and hard work. These values developed in and were strengthened by the nation’s religious heritage. Several of these values—individual freedom, self-reliance, material wealth, and hard work—were particularly affected. In this chapter, we will first examine how the historical context shaped the nation’s religious heritage and helped produce and reinforce these cultural values. Then we will look at how these values affect the religious landscape today.

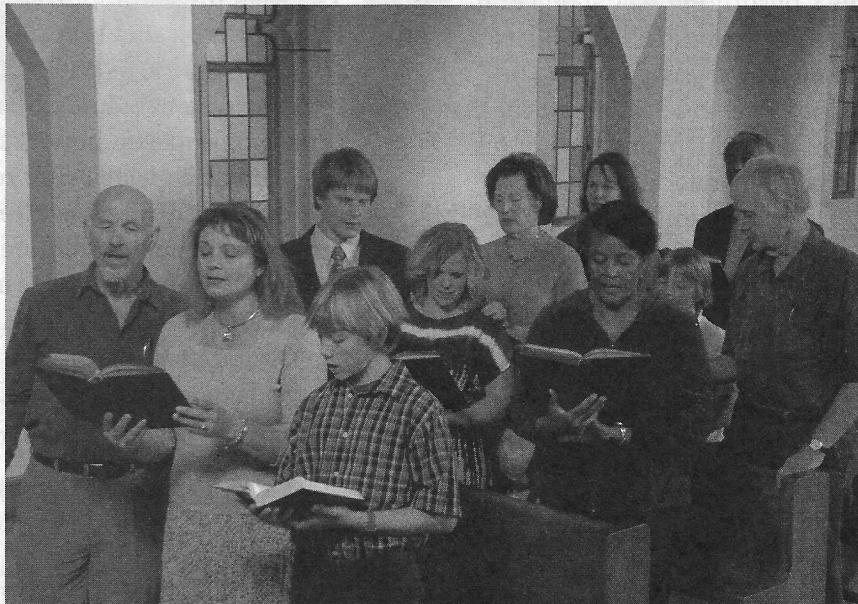
3 From the beginning, religion played an important role in the history of the United States. The Catholic faith was first brought to the North American continent by the Spanish in the 1500s. For the next 300 years, Catholic missionaries and settlers

from Spain and then Latin America came to what is now Florida, California, and the Southwest. Many of the cities were named by these missionaries and settlers—St. Augustine, San Francisco, Santa Fe, and San Antonio, for example. French Canadian Catholic missionaries also came with the explorers and traders from Quebec, down the Mississippi River to New Orleans. In the 1600s, European settlers began establishing colonies along the east coast of North America. Although there were some Catholics, the vast majority

of the European settlers were Protestants, most from England. As the new nation formed, it was the Protestant branch of the Christian faith that had the strongest effect on the development of the religious climate in the United States.

The Development of Protestantism

4 The Protestant branch of the Christian faith broke away from the Roman Catholic Church in Europe in the sixteenth century because of important differences in religious beliefs. (The Eastern Orthodox branch of the Christian faith had separated from the Roman Catholic Church in 1054.) At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church was the center of religious life in western European countries; the Catholic pope and the priests played the role of parent to the people in spiritual matters. They told people what was right and wrong, and they granted them forgiveness for sins¹ against God and the Christian faith.



Americans at worship in a Christian church

5 The Protestants, on the other hand, insisted that all individuals must stand alone before God. If people sinned, they should seek their forgiveness directly from God rather than from a priest speaking in God's name. In place of the power and authority of priests, Protestants substituted what they called the "priesthood of all believers." This meant that every individual was solely responsible for his or her own relationship with God.

6 After the Protestants broke away from the Catholic Church, they found that they could not agree among themselves about many beliefs. Therefore, the Protestants

began to form separate churches, called *denominations*. (The traditional Protestant denominations in the United States are Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal, and United Church of Christ). There was much bitterness among some of the religious groups in the 1600s, and many Protestant denominations experienced religious persecution.² A number of people were even killed

because of their beliefs. The result of this persecution was that many Protestants were ready to leave their native countries in order to have freedom to practice their particular religious beliefs. Consequently, among the early settlers who came to America in the 1600s, there were many Protestants seeking religious freedom.

7 In the previous chapter we noted that this desire for religious freedom was one of the strongest reasons why many colonial settlers came to America. Generally speaking, the lack of any established national religion in America appealed

¹ *sins*: things someone does that are against religious laws

² *persecution*: cruel or unfair treatment, especially because of religious or political beliefs

strongly to European Protestants, whether or not they were being persecuted. A large number of Protestant denominations were established in America. At first, some denominations hoped to force their views and beliefs on others, but the colonies were simply too large for any one denomination to gain control over the others. The idea of separation of church and state became accepted.

- 8 When the Constitution was adopted in 1789, the government was forbidden to establish a national church; no denomination was to be favored over the others. The government and the church had to remain separate, and freedom of religion was guaranteed by the first amendment. Under these conditions, a great variety of different Protestant denominations developed and grew, with each denomination having a “live and let live” attitude toward the others. Diversity was accepted and strengthened. Today, the various Protestant denominations have completely separate church organizations, and although there are many similarities, there are also significant differences in their religious teachings and beliefs.

Self-Reliance and the Protestant Heritage of Self-Improvement

- 9 Protestantism has been a powerful force in shaping the values and beliefs of Americans. One of the most important values associated with American Protestantism is the value of self-improvement, an outgrowth of self-reliance. Christianity often emphasizes the natural sinfulness of human nature. However, unlike Catholics, Protestants do not go to priests for forgiveness of their sins; individuals are left alone before God to improve themselves and ask for God’s guidance, forgiveness, and grace. For this reason, Protestantism has traditionally encouraged a strong and restless desire for self-improvement.

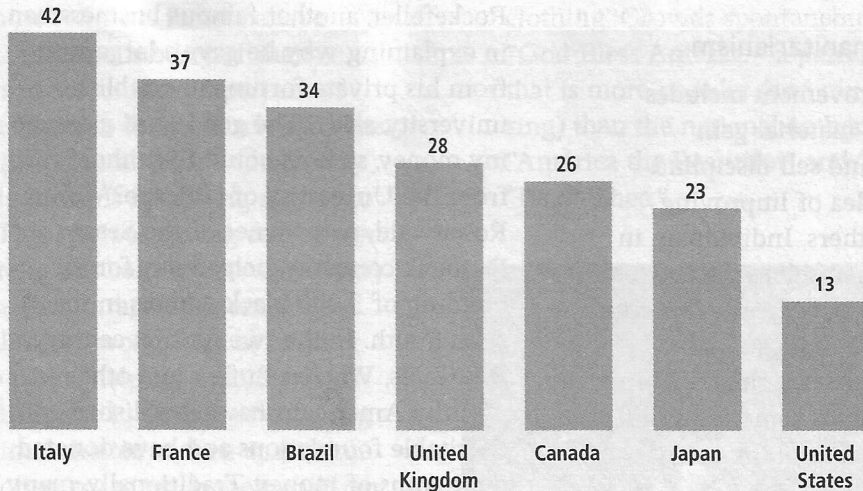
- 10 Perhaps the most dramatic example of the idea of self-improvement is the experience of being “born again.” Individuals who have had this experience say that opening their hearts to God and Jesus Christ changed their lives so completely that it was like being born again. Many evangelicals, or religious conservatives, believe this is an important experience to have.

- 11 The need for self-improvement has reached far beyond self-improvement in the purely moral or religious sense. Today it can be seen in countless books that offer advice to people on how to stop smoking, lose weight, or have better relationships. Books of this type often offer advice on how to be happier and more successful in life. They are referred to as “self-help” books, and many are best sellers. They are the natural products of a culture in which people believe that “God helps those who help themselves.”

Material Success, Hard Work, and Self-Discipline

- 12 The achievement of material success is probably the most widely respected form of self-improvement in the United States. Many scholars believe that the nation’s Protestant heritage is also largely responsible for bringing this about. The idea of mixing materialism and religion may seem contradictory; religion is considered to be concerned with spiritual matters, not material possessions. How can the two mix?
- 13 Some of the early European Protestant leaders believed that people who were blessed by God might be recognized in the world by their material success. Other church leaders, particularly in the United States, made an even stronger connection between gaining material wealth and being blessed by God. In 1900, for example, Bishop William Lawrence

AVERAGE NUMBER OF PAID VACATION DAYS



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proclaimed,⁴ “Godliness is in league with⁵ riches. . . . Material prosperity is helping to make the national character sweeter, more joyous, more unselfish, more Christlike.”

- 14 American religious leaders, however, never encouraged the idea of gaining wealth without hard work and self-discipline. Many scholars believe that the emphasis on these two values made an important contribution to the industrial growth of the United States. Protestant leaders viewed the work of all people as holy, not just that of priests. They also believed that the capacity for self-discipline was a holy characteristic blessed by God. Self-discipline was often defined as the willingness to save and invest one’s money rather than spend it on immediate pleasures. John Wesley, the leader of the Methodist faith, told his followers, “Earn all you can, give all you can, save all you can.” Encouraging people to save may also have helped create a good climate for the industrial growth of the United States,

which depended on hard work and a willingness to save and invest money.

- 15 The belief in hard work and self-discipline in pursuit of material gain and other goals is often referred to as “the Protestant work ethic” or “the Puritan work ethic.” It is important to understand that this work ethic has had an influence far beyond the Protestant church. Many religious groups in the United States share this work ethic, and even Americans who have no attachment to a particular church are influenced by the work ethic in their daily lives. Interestingly, the United States is the only industrialized country that does not have a legal requirement for workers to have a certain number of paid vacation days. Americans take an average of only two weeks of vacation time a year, while workers in other countries take as many as four, five, or even more weeks. Also, many Americans who could retire at age 65 or 66 continue to work for more years. Many Americans are proud to be called

⁴ proclaimed: said publically or officially that something is true

⁵ in league with: working together secretly

“workaholics,” people who work long hours, often seven days a week.

Volunteerism and Humanitarianism

- 16 The idea of self-improvement includes more than achieving material gain through hard work and self-discipline. It also includes the idea of improving oneself by helping others. Individuals, in other words, make themselves into better persons by contributing some of their time or money to charitable, educational, or religious causes that are designed to help others. The philosophy is sometimes called *volunteerism* or *humanitarianism*.
- 17 Historically, some extremely wealthy Americans have made generous contributions to help others. In the early 1900s, for example, Andrew Carnegie, a famous American businessman, gave away more than \$300 million to help support schools and universities and to

build public libraries in thousands of communities in the United States. John D. Rockefeller, another famous businessman, in explaining why he gave a large sum from his private fortune to establish a university, said, “The good Lord gave me my money, so how could I withhold it from the University of Chicago?” Julius Rosenwald, part-owner of the Sears Roebuck company, helped pay for the building of 5,000 black schools in the rural South. In the twenty-first century, Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, and other wealthy Americans have established charitable foundations and have donated huge sums of money. Traditionally, many average Americans have also agreed that they should devote part of their time and wealth to religious or humanitarian causes. Their motivation may be part idealism and part self-improvement, a desire to be acceptable in the eyes of God and also in the eyes of other Americans.



Volunteers clean up trash.

18 The spirit of charitable giving and volunteerism continues in America today. Some religious faiths believe that it is the responsibility of their members to contribute 10 percent of what they earn to their church and other charities. Incidentally, individuals may get tax deductions for giving money to charity. This spirit of giving can be seen outside religious contexts as well. Many businesses encourage their employees to do volunteer work, such as helping clean up parks, helping a child who is having difficulty in school, or working in an animal shelter in their spare time. Parents often try to teach their children that they have a responsibility to help others. A recent *Parents* magazine had a cover story advising parents how to “raise a child who gives back.” The article said that children should be taught the value of volunteering, including giving money to charity. “Volunteering boosts kids’ self-esteem and teaches them to be grateful,” the article promised, a good illustration of the American mixture of idealism and self-improvement.

September 11, 2001, and the National Religion

19 All Americans and many people around the world can remember exactly what they were doing at the moment they heard that terrorists had attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. People in New York City and Washington, D.C., were especially devastated. Everyone knew someone who was touched by the tragedy. Immediately, there was an outpouring of love, charity, and patriotism around the country. So many people volunteered to help that officials had to limit the numbers. Millions of dollars were raised for the families of the victims, and Americans felt a huge surge of pride and love for their country. Eighty percent of them displayed

the American flag—in the windows of their houses, on their cars, even on their clothing. Crowds spontaneously sang “God Bless America,” a patriotic song that is more popular (and much easier to sing) than the national anthem, along with “America the Beautiful” and “My Country ’Tis of Thee.”



Firefighters stand at a memorial to those killed at the World Trade Center.

20 This mixture of religion and patriotism is an example of what some scholars have called the “national religion” of the United States. The roots of the national religion go back to colonial times. In the countries from which the American colonists emigrated, the dominant values of the nation were often supported by an organized national church. Although Americans made certain that no organized national church would exist in their young country, they have, over the years, developed a number of informal practices

that combine national patriotism with religion. The main function of this national religion is to provide support for the dominant values of the nation and comfort in times of grief. Thus, it does in an informal and less organized way what nationally organized churches did for European nations in earlier times.

- 21 Some observers of American society believe that the various practices that are called the national religion can have harmful effects, however. Sometimes these practices can help to create a climate in which disagreement with current national practices is discouraged or not tolerated. There have been times when citizens have disagreed with their government's

decision to wage war, for example, and other Americans accused them of being unpatriotic. This happened during the war in Vietnam, when protesters were told, "America—love it, or leave it." A similar division of opinion occurred over the U.S. decision to invade Iraq in 2003.

The Religious Landscape Today: Polarization Vs. Pluralism

- 22 The religious landscape in the United States is complicated and changing. In *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell discuss two forces at work in the United States today: religious polarization and pluralism. There is growing polarization between evangelicals, or religious conservatives, and secular liberals. Increasingly, Americans find themselves at one end of the spectrum or another, while the number of moderates in the middle decreases. Evangelicals believe in strictly following the teachings of the Bible (as they and the church leaders interpret it) and regularly attending worship services. They are socially (and often politically) more conservative than religious moderates or liberals. They may be against abortion and gay marriage, for example, and they may believe in creationism instead of evolution. The debate between religious conservatives and liberals can grow quite heated. Some commentators have even described this split as "culture wars." However, Putnam and Campbell say there is another force at work:

America peacefully combines a high degree of religious devotion with tremendous religious diversity—including growing ranks of the nonreligious. . . . How can religious pluralism coexist with religious polarization? The answer lies in the fact that, in America, religion is highly fluid. . . . Religions compete, adapt and evolve as individual Americans freely move from one congregation to another, and even from one religion to another.



Firefighters hang a giant American flag over the side of the American Express tower.

23 What American value has allowed religious pluralism to coexist with religious polarization? The fundamental American belief in individual freedom and the right of individuals to practice their own religion is at the center of religious experience in the United States. The great diversity of ethnic backgrounds has produced a climate of religious pluralism, and most of the religions of the world are now practiced here. Although the overwhelming majority of Americans are Christians, other religions and people from other cultures make important contributions to the religious landscape. There are now about as many Muslims living in the United States as there are Jews. People of Hispanic origin now make up nearly one-half of the Catholic Church here. In addition to Buddhism and Hinduism, Asian immigrants have brought with them other traditional religions of

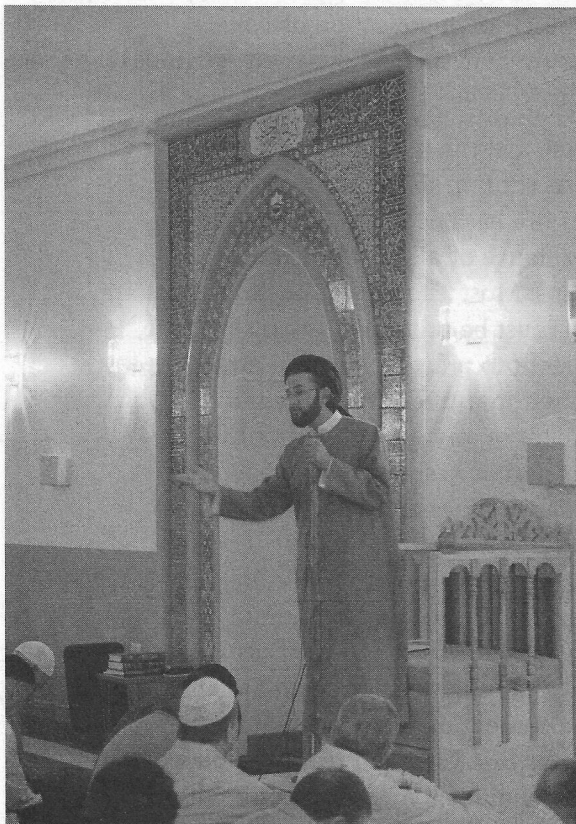
East Asia—Daoism, Confucianism, and Shintoism. And the Native American religions are still practiced and studied today, particularly for their teachings about living in harmony with nature.

24 The Census of American Religious Congregations has been tracking 236 different religions in the United States, from Albanian Orthodox to Zoroastrian, every ten years. They report in the latest census that Muslims (Islam) and Mormons (Church of the Latter-day Saints) are two of the fastest growing religious groups in the country. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of Muslims grew by 66 percent and the number of Mormons grew by 44 percent, while the number of Protestants fell by 5 percent to below 50 percent of the population for the first time. (There are also estimates of about one million Buddhists and Hindus.) Remembering that the total population of the United States is now over 310 million, here are America's top 10 religions:

1. Catholic	58.9 million
2. Baptist	27.2 million
3. Methodist	12.2 million
4. Non-denominational Evangelical Protestant	12.2 million
5. Lutheran	7.2 million
6. Latter-day Saints (Mormons)	6.4 million
7. Pentecostal	5.8 million
8. Presbyterian Reformed	5.0 million
9. Islam (Muslims)	2.6 million
10. Judaism (Jews)	2.3 million*

*Source: *The Association of Religion Data Archives*

25 One of the most dramatic developments in recent years is the rapid rise in the number of people who say they have no religious affiliation. Almost 20 percent of adults and one third of those under 30 do not consider themselves to be a part of any particular church or faith. They



American Muslims at prayer

are referred to as the unaffiliated, or the “nones” (since they choose “none” when asked about their religious affiliation), and now number 49 million. Interestingly, 68 percent of them say that they believe in God, but they have no desire to be part of organized religion. Often they refer to themselves as being “spiritual, but not religious.” They are more liberal and more secular than Americans who are affiliated with some religious group.

26 Another important development is the decline in the membership of traditional mainline Protestant churches. In the list of top ten faiths above, only four are traditional Protestant denominations (Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, and Presbyterian). Mainline churches tend to be moderate and more liberal than the evangelicals and religious conservatives, with the exception of the Baptist Church. Most Baptists are evangelicals. (Pentecostals are evangelicals, too, but they are not generally considered as traditional mainline Protestants.)

27 There has also been a rise in the number of *non-denominational* evangelical Protestants. These churches are not affiliated with a traditional Protestant denomination and are often community churches organized by dynamic religious leaders. Some of them are “megachurches.” Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church in Orange County, California, which was founded in 1980, now has 100,000 members and an average weekend attendance of over 20,000. Megachurches have contemporary worship services and often focus on helping people live “happy, fulfilled Christian lives,” a modern message of self-improvement. They are an example of how some American churches have evolved and adapted to meet changing needs, particularly of young people.

Religious Diversity in the United States: A Spiritual Kaleidoscope⁶

28 This chapter began with the assertion that the United States has been and still is a religious country, but that the religious landscape is complicated and changing. The historical “live and let live” tolerance of early Protestant faiths has led to a modern acceptance of diverse religions by most Americans. Although there are some who are intolerant and would disagree, the majority of Americans believe that there are many paths to God and their particular religion is not the only valid faith. The traditional lines drawn between members of different religions have broken down so that Americans frequently marry people of different faiths. This is especially true of younger Americans. More and more people work with, live near, and are friends with people of different cultures and faiths. This has created a spiritual kaleidoscope, where people move between faiths, sometimes creating their own collection of beliefs drawn from a number of different religious traditions.

29 The belief that the individual, not the organized church, should be the center of religious life has encouraged a tolerance and acceptance of all faiths by most Americans. Most also believe that religious freedom must be protected—that everyone has the right to practice his or her own religion without interference by the government or anyone else. America’s religious heritage seems to have encouraged certain basic values that members of many diverse faiths find easy to accept. This has helped to unite many different religious groups in the United States without requiring any to abandon their faiths. Cultural and religious pluralism has also created a context of tolerance that further strengthens the American reality of many different religions living peacefully within a single nation.

⁶ *kaleidoscope: colors or patterns that change quickly*