

Religious Practice in the United States

This paper examines how Americans practice their faith in their everyday lives. It focuses upon the religious practices of American Christians and identifies some similarities with various religious practices of other American religious groups, including Jews and Muslims. In doing so, it illustrates the powerful influence of American cultural ideals, including voluntarism, innovation, and individualism, on religious practice in the United States.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars who study religion in comparative or historical context often distinguish between the beliefs and the practices of particular religious traditions. Religious beliefs are said to include particular understandings of sacred texts and creeds, as well as theological concepts that flow from them such as divinity, creation, salvation, faith, and the community of believers. By contrast, religious practices include ritual and liturgical worship practices, prayer, missionary activity, adherence to dietary and ethical codes, and the ordering of religious communities.

While all religions incorporate both components, some religious traditions tend to emphasize belief as the more important element, while others stress practice. For example, broadly speaking, Christians emphasize belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ and the saving grace of God as the essence of Christianity; salvation hinges on faith,

not works. In contrast, Jews stress adherence to religious law in the practices of worship and daily life. Neither tradition devalues belief or practice; the difference is of degree rather than kind.

Beliefs and practices are related and mutually formative. Beliefs clearly shape religious practices, while engaging in particular practices often transforms and deepens people's beliefs. Considering specific beliefs and practices is a useful means of understanding and comparing religious traditions and communities. In this light, the companion paper "An Introduction to Christian Theology," which outlines the basic beliefs of Christianity, stands as an important complement to this paper on religious practice.

This paper focuses on the practice of religion in the United States with particular attention to the influence of culture—especially voluntarism,

innovation, and individualism—on American religious practices. How do Americans worship in their churches, synagogues, and mosques? What attracts them to their religions and why? Why do some people convert from one religion or denomination to another? How do people share their enthusiasm for their faiths? Scholars have produced an extensive literature about the ways Americans practice their faith; this paper summarizes some of their findings. It begins with

descriptions of American worship practices, religious communities, and religious holidays; continues with a discussion of doctrine and practice; and concludes with sections on witness and on religion and politics. Since most Americans are Christians, the bulk of the paper describes Christian religious practices; when possible, it also discusses other religions observed in the United States, especially Islam and Judaism.

WORSHIP PRACTICES

The practice of communally honoring the divine is central in most religions. Religious Americans gather regularly in all manner of venues to practice their faiths. Islam, Judaism, and Christianity each set aside one day of the week on which they typically gather for worship: Friday for Muslims, Saturday for Jews, and Sunday for Christians. In addition, each religion maintains its own calendar of special holidays or feasts; the later section on religious holidays describes some of these in detail. At their best, all Americans, religious or not, recognize the rights of their peers to observe the religion of their choice. This is increasingly true even when special observances of religious holidays interfere with the regular operations of society such as conventional business or school hours.

In American Christianity, the actual worship practices of different denominations vary widely. (A “denomination” is a group of religious congregations united under a common faith and name and organized under a single administrative hierarchy. The term is primarily used to describe Christian churches.) For example, Roman Catholic and Episcopalian church services are

strongly ritualized or “liturgical,” while some Protestant churches have a more free-flowing or “improvisational” worship style. This section describes the structure of various denominations’ worship services and discusses the effects of the cultural ideas of innovation and voluntarism on how these worship practices have evolved in the United States.

Liturgical and Improvisational Worship

The term “liturgy” refers to the particular procedure according to which religious worship is conducted. Not all denominations use the term “liturgy” to describe their worship. The worship services of denominations that do use this term tend to be highly ritualized and time-honored.

The Roman Catholic Mass is an archetypical example of a liturgical worship style. Developed over many centuries, this liturgy follows nearly the same format whenever it is celebrated anywhere in the world. Although minor adjustments to the details of the liturgy are made regularly, major changes in the Mass were last approved during the Second Vatican Council, the most recent

meeting of the worldwide Roman Catholic Church, which took place from 1962 to 1965. These changes included allowing the use of local or “vernacular” languages during Mass, whereas formerly all Masses were celebrated in Latin, and turning the priest and the altar to face the assembled congregation rather than the back wall of the church. The council also emphasized lay participation in liturgy and Bible study. Despite these changes, the essential elements of the Mass—including ritualized prayers, scripture reading, homily and celebration of the Eucharist or “communion”—have remained relatively constant through the centuries.

The structure of Protestant worship services varies according to denomination. Some denominations, such as the Episcopalians, conduct worship services in a highly scripted liturgy that closely resembles the Roman Catholic Mass. Other denominations, such as Presbyterians and Methodists, utilize a liturgical format that may appear different from Catholic or Episcopalian liturgies but still follows a particular structure. All of these services may be referred to as “liturgical.”

Still other Protestant denominations eschew strict liturgical practice in favor of more improvisational worship. Many “non-denominational” Protestant churches, identifying themselves simply as “Christian,” follow a simple format consisting of communal singing, a prayer led by the minister, a lengthy sermon by the minister exploring a biblical text of his or her choice, and a concluding prayer. In a few denominations, including Pentecostal and some African-American churches, worshipers express themselves through lively participation in worship, voicing spirited faith-filled exclamations, dancing, and “speaking in tongues,” or praying in a mysterious language

inspired by the Holy Spirit. These spontaneous outbursts of religious enthusiasm are discouraged in many other churches’ worship services. Quaker worship services, called “meetings,” follow the simplest structure of all: the people simply sit in silence until someone feels God’s prompting to speak. American Christian worship practices are thus characterized by great diversity.

Innovation and Worship Practices

Liturgical worship practices are sometimes called into question by certain aspects of American culture. On the one hand, in liturgical worship, the individual finds a place in a web of meanings defined by tradition and ritual. On the other hand, American culture is highly individualistic, emphasizing that people ought to choose what they think is best for themselves. Liturgy can be perceived as counter-cultural because liturgical structures remains constant while American culture is innovative and ever-changing.

Because of this tension, it can be difficult for liturgically-oriented denominations to maintain their “pure” form in the United States. As noted, a worship service is usually led by a single minister, while American culture is democratic and populist. For example, the Catholic Mass is highly liturgical and is regulated by church leaders beyond the level of the individual parish. Even so, unofficial adaptations to the Mass are sometimes made in response to specific needs.

This issue is especially relevant in immigrant communities. First-generation immigrants tend to cling to traditional values and worship practices, while second and third generations of immigrant families begin to assimilate to American culture in religious observance as in other areas of life.

For example, Hispanics constitute a well-established and growing community in the United States. Although their cultural heritage is traditionally Catholic, many Hispanics express an affinity for the more improvisational worship practices of the evangelical churches. To draw them back into the Catholic church, some priests have experimented with incorporating Hispanic art, music, and dance to make the Mass more welcoming, emotional, and personal. In this way, the Mass can be adapted for different cultures.

Despite such trends, liturgical denominations remain strong in the United States. Given the fast pace and ever-changing nature of American society, members of these churches often take comfort in the fact that they can count on their church's worship services to follow the same format every time they attend.

In contrast to the more liturgical denominations, some Protestant denominations, especially evangelical, "non-denominational" churches, embrace cultural innovations as a means to attract new members, particularly young people. These innovations may include using rock music in worship services as opposed to classical hymns, holding services in venues such as school gymnasiums and former supermarkets instead of traditional church buildings, and encouraging people to wear casual clothes to church rather than following the traditional practice of dressing up. Large churches now also routinely use computers to project music lyrics, Bible passages, and live images of the preacher onto huge screens behind the altar. One such Boston-area church recently ran an ad campaign advertising free coffee and promising that there is never a "cover charge" —a fee commonly charged to enter nightclubs—for admission. Thus, various

Christian denominations respond to the American ideal of innovation quite differently.

Voluntarism and Worship Practices

The most influential aspect of American culture on religious practice is voluntarism. Historically, Christian faith has been handed down from parents to children, which is often called inherited or "ascribed" religious identity. However, the majority of Americans understand participation in a religious tradition to be voluntary or "achieved": membership in a faith community is something one chooses for oneself. Further, the American separation of church and state precludes the government from supporting particular religions, so Christian churches often compete with one another and with other religions to attract members. (For more about the separation of church and state, see the companion paper on that topic.) In this environment, drawing in members and retaining their loyalty is a practical necessity for churches; if they fail, they will simply cease to exist. Understanding this, the clergy and lay leadership of most Christian churches try not to wander too far from the task of satisfying the needs of their members.

For this reason, observers of religion in the United States have identified similarities between the "religious marketplace," in which churchgoers "shop" for a local church that suits their particular needs, and the economic marketplace, in which consumers shop at stores that cater to their particular needs. The analogy ought not be taken too far, for the spiritual "goods" that religions provide are largely intangible and cannot be priced by a market. Nevertheless, churches in the United States also provide many tangible services that

attract members: childcare, marriage counseling, recreation, and social networking, to name a few.

The American emphasis on voluntarism and individualism can also help to explain why some Christian denominations have not maintained a strong liturgical worship practice in the United States. In some churches, if a denomination's worship services appear insufficiently focused on the individual's immediate spiritual needs, attendees are likely to join other churches or religions, seeking personalized worship experiences that relate directly to the practical difficulties of daily life.

American evangelical churches provide these experiences especially well. Some "megachurches" that have arisen in many American cities attract thousands of people to their worship services, so that the services must be televised in multiple buildings to accommodate the crowds. Besides using innovative worship practices to appeal to attendees, these churches augment their Sunday services—so large they may be perceived as impersonal—with small group meetings during the week. Here, members gather to study the Bible and discuss their faith as it relates to the challenges they face in their daily lives. While at times these groups resemble therapy sessions, the takeaway message is invariably positive: go and be faithful to God in all you do—then come back next week to worship with the community and share your experiences with the group.

In these ways, cultural innovation, voluntarism, and individualism contribute to the great diversity among American Christian churches. Churches attract and keep members by variously adapting or rejecting cultural innovations and by enhancing the services they provide at the local and individual level. Each church offers a worship service people want, whether it is a peaceful and unstructured gathering like the Quaker meeting, a lively worship service in the Pentecostal tradition, a tightly choreographed liturgy, or any other variety of communal religious experience.

Some Americans remain committed to a single religious tradition throughout their lives. But given the cultural ideals of voluntarism, innovation, and individualism, many do not. Some turn from the religious identity of their birth to embrace another religion altogether. Others find meaning in rediscovering religious practices of their ethnic heritage—for example, Jewish or Native American traditions. And in increasing numbers, Americans are creating their own spiritualities by eschewing formal religious practice altogether, adopting practices from several different traditions, and identifying themselves as "spiritual but not religious." As a result of the availability of so many religious practices and the cultural acceptance of religious "shopping," the religious identity of many Americans is fluid rather than stable.

RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Nearly all religions in the United States are "public" in the sense that they encourage believers to join together in public places to worship. This

desire for fellowship has long been recognized as one of the most significant aspects of American religious practice. When the German sociologist

of religion, Max Weber visited the United States in 1904 to attend the World's Fair in St. Louis, he observed how much religious believers in this country valued seeing others and being seen by them. Indeed, he argued that membership in a particular religious community signified one's social standing and even creditworthiness in newly emerging American cities and towns.

Weber and other sociologists recognized that religion is, among other things, a social institution that can be analyzed as such. There are major differences in the ways religious institutions are understood and organized. Certain churches, such as the Catholic church, conform to a "church type" model in which Christ's grace works through the ministry and sacraments of the given community. This type of community is naturally hierarchical in that it recognizes that some individuals are more learned or spiritually advanced than others. Such individuals serve as teachers or role models and may occupy various offices in the institutional hierarchy. Other churches, such as many evangelical churches, conform more to a "sect type" model in which the community is viewed as a voluntary association of individual believers.

The Catholic church is organized hierarchically—although not all decisions are made at the top of the hierarchy—as are some Protestant denominations such as the Episcopalian church. But most Protestant churches are more congregational in nature, meaning that decisions affecting local congregations are made at the local level; it is a "bottom up" approach as opposed to the "top down" approach in a hierarchical structure. American Judaism is also subdivided in a way that resembles the Christian division into denominations. The three main branches of Judaism are called Orthodox, Conservative, and

Reform, and each of these has smaller subdivisions, such as Ultra-Orthodox and Modern Orthodox. ("Orthodox" is a term derived from the Greek words *ortho*, meaning "correct," and *doxa*, meaning "thought.") So important are the distinctions between denominations and religious subdivisions that observers have spoken of the United States as a "denominational society."

Just as American culture shapes how people worship and influences their personal behavior, it also influences the ways in which people come together to share religious experiences. American culture is populist in spirit; the wisdom of ordinary people is constantly praised, while elites are often dismissed as being out of touch with what "the people" want and need. This populist sensibility poses a challenge to hierarchical religious traditions, for denominations are usually chartered organizations with national or international headquarters, permanent staff, a large budget, and a mandate—whether broad or narrow—to speak for all members of the denomination. But even with these resources and national leadership, denominational leaders often struggle to enforce theological conformity among their many member congregations. A famous American politician once said that "all politics is local," and the same could be said about Christianity in the United States. With certain exceptions such as the Catholic church, it is the congregation, the specific church located in a particular place, that tends to retain authority.

Generally speaking, when compared to American Christians, American Jews and Muslims have been more resistant to this trend and have tended to retain more traditional, hierarchical leadership and community structures. (For a discussion of American religious pluralism, see the companion

paper on that topic.) For example, many American Muslims have responded to the challenge of widespread cultural diversity within their community in the United States by stressing the universal nature of Islam as a path of faith. But in the American context, this stress on the universal *ummah* or community can weaken the traditional Sunni-Shi'ite distinction. Thus, the influence of culture appears once again in a different guise.

The United States' democratic and populist cultural leanings, reflecting the values of voluntarism and individualism, create a certain amount of pressure toward congregationalism. Congregationalism is the vesting of final religious authority in the local congregation rather than in a national or international body of leadership. The roots of American congregationalism come from the Puritans who settled New England in the seventeenth century, who organized themselves in congregational fashion and later came to be known as Congregationalists. Two other major Protestant denominations also take their names from their organizing structures: the Episcopalians, who govern themselves through an association of bishops, and the Presbyterians, whose "presbyteries" are bodies of church elders. Even the American Catholic church, which is being increasingly influenced by this congregational pressure. It manifests itself in the committed participation of growing numbers of laity in parish affairs and the cognizance among some bishops of the needs of laity when decisions are made to open or close parish churches or schools.

Some of the most subtle and fascinating examples of congregationalism involve non-Christian religions in the United States. Many American Jews, for example, have developed their

synagogues into "community centers," complete with athletic facilities and rooms for social functions. Buddhists have created temples that, like churches, perform marriages or host funerals. Local Muslim communities, too, are creating community centers, schools, and day care facilities for children that resemble those established by other American religious groups. Although imams and mosques are not perfectly analogous to Christian ministers and churches—churches, for example, primarily draw a fixed membership of regular worshipers—many are taking cues from their coreligionists to create fundraising committees and boards of directors to raise money in the American style. In this sense, one can hesitantly speak of the "congregationalism" of Islam in the United States.

The limits of congregationalism are often felt as a pressure to focus on even smaller units, namely the individual. Congregations are intended to bring together disparate individuals not only for their personal spiritual benefit but also to pursue common purposes. But the strong populism of American culture corresponds to a powerful individualism, so that Americans often resist the theological, liturgical, moral or social demands of membership in denominations.

As mentioned above, American voluntarism and individualism are evident in the frequency with which people change congregations or denominations or even craft their own belief systems. Scholars used to speak of religion as an "ascribed status," something a person inherited from their family background. But more and more, American religion is "achieved," chosen by the individual in the course of his or her life. As a result, the American religious landscape itself manifests considerable fluidity.

RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS

Religious holidays—the word means “holy day”—or feast days are particularly important in American religions, as they are everywhere. Each religion, in accordance with its roots and its worldwide community of believers, maintains its own calendar of feasts throughout the year, when the community gathers to worship together. This is equally true of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. This section describes some of the major holidays in the Christian, Muslim, and Jewish traditions and discusses how they are understood—and even, at times, celebrated—by the wider American society.

Religious holidays should be carefully distinguished from secular American holidays. The United States observes national or “federal” holidays, most notably including the Fourth of July—the American Independence Day—and Thanksgiving, commemorating the joint harvest celebration of the earliest colonists and the Native Americans who helped the newcomers survive their first year in a strange land. As a result of the Christian origins of the United States, two Christian holidays—Christmas and Easter—are also holidays that most Americans celebrate, whether or not they mark the religious significance of those days. The subsection on Christian holidays discusses this in more detail.

Unlike Christmas and Easter, the holidays of non-Christian religious traditions are unknown to most Americans. At this time, no other religious holidays are observed as secular holidays in the United States; Jewish and Muslim observances remain strictly religious.

While the United States government does not recognize these observances as federal holidays, under federal law employers must grant members of all religious traditions time off work or school to observe their particular holidays. State and local governments also have the power to grant time off for the holidays of various religions when it is deemed prudent to do so; for example, in Brookline, Massachusetts, a city with a large Jewish population, some Jewish holidays are official school holidays because attendance on those days would be low.

Christian Holidays

The Christian calendar contains many feasts, some of which vary in significance according to denomination. For all Christians, however, the two most important Christian holidays are Christmas and Easter. Christmas is celebrated on December 25 and commemorates Jesus’ birth. Easter, observed on a Sunday in early spring, celebrates Jesus’ resurrection—or rising—from the dead. To mark these festivals, Christians attend special church services and gather with family and friends.

In Christian churches, each of these holidays is preceded by a season of preparation and followed by a season of celebration. During Advent, the four weeks before Christmas, Christians remember the events leading up to the birth of Jesus and wait joyfully for his coming anew in their hearts. The beginning of Advent marks the Christian “new year.” During Lent, the forty days before Easter, Christians

pray and fast in repentance for their sins and in solidarity with Jesus' own suffering and death as they prepare to celebrate his resurrection and their salvation from sin. The "Christmas season" is celebrated for twelve days after Christmas and the "Easter season" for fifty days. These seasons mark the high points of the Christian year; many Christians who do not attend weekly worship services do return for Christmas and Easter.

Besides being the two most important Christian religious feasts, Christmas and Easter are also celebrated by most secular and non-practicing Christian Americans. Christmas is recognized as a federal holiday by the United States government; most American companies expect to grant employees time off around Christmas and Easter, whether or not they are Christians. As at Thanksgiving, Americans gather with their extended family and friends. Secular celebrations of Christmas and Easter usually overlook their religious significance and omit the corresponding seasons of spiritual preparation. For example, the tradition of giving gifts at Christmas recalls the gifts that the Bible says were offered to Jesus upon his own birth; American society has adopted the practice of giving gifts at Christmas but disregards the origin of this practice. Also, the American stock market traditionally closes on the Friday before Easter, when Christians mark the day on which Jesus died. And children's "Easter egg hunts," though their origins are Christian, are enjoyed by both Christians and non-Christians. In these ways, secular and non-practicing Christian Americans celebrate these Christian holidays while minimizing their religious significance.

Muslim Holidays

Along with Muslims around the world, American Muslims celebrate traditional Muslim holidays. The Muslim calendar, like the Jewish and Christian calendars, contains many feast days. All Muslims are required to celebrate two particular holidays, and this holds true in the United States as well.

The first holiday, Eid ul-Fitr, or the "breaking of the fast of Ramadan," is known as the "Lesser Feast." It marks the end of Ramadan, a month containing memories of many holy events in the history of Islam. Muslims observe this month by fasting during daylight hours. The second, Eid ul-Adha, or the "feast of sacrifice," is known as the "Greater Feast." It commemorates the willingness of the Prophet Ibrahim (known among Christians and Jews as Abraham) to sacrifice his son Ismael (Ishmael) according to God's orders and the substitution of a sheep for Ismael. Eid ul-Adha also marks the end of the "Hajj," the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca. When they can afford to do so, Muslims observe this feast by sacrificing domestic animals, usually sheep, and giving the meat to those in need.

Although these and all Muslim holidays remain unfamiliar to most non-Muslim Americans, awareness of them is increasing. For example, in the 1990s, President Clinton began hosting celebrations in the White House to mark Eid ul-Fitr. As Americans' interest in Islam grows, they may begin to pay more attention to why and how Muslims celebrate their holidays.

Jewish Holidays

Following the custom of Jews around the world, American Jews too have a rich annual calendar of religious celebrations. In particular, American Jews celebrate two major holidays as the “High Holidays”: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Rosh Hashanah marks the Jewish New Year. On this day, Jews blow a trumpetlike ram’s horn or “shofar;” they symbolically cast away their sins and plan changes to make in their lives during the new year. Yom Kippur, the “Day of Atonement,” follows ten days after Rosh Hashanah. On this day and the days leading up to it, Jews ask God’s forgiveness for their sins, and they also ask forgiveness of people they have wronged during the past year. With this spiritual “housecleaning,” Jews prepare themselves for the year ahead.

Although these two Jewish festivals are unknown to most Americans, many Americans have heard of Hanukkah, perhaps because it occurs around the same time as Christmas. This eight-day “Festival of Lights” recalls the rededication of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem in the year 165 BCE, when the Temple flame burned for eight days even though the supply of sacred olive oil was enough to fuel it for only one day. Festivities revolve around the ceremonial lighting of an eight-branched candelabra or “menorah” and include exchanging gifts, playing with a toy called a dreidel, and eating special foods cooked in olive oil.

One sign of the increasing awareness of festivals like Hanukkah, at least in American consumer culture, is the availability of Hanukkah greeting

cards for sale alongside Christmas cards. As Americans begin to notice such evidence of other religious traditions in the course of their daily lives, they may begin to inquire into the meaning and purpose of these celebrations.

Holidays and Religious Awareness

Clearly, Christians, Jews, and Muslims celebrate different holidays in diverse ways. But the practices of the traditions do reveal similarities; for example, all three religions emphasize prayer and fasting at various points during their festal cycles. Because it is often easier to compare and contrast religious practices than religious beliefs, American schools teach children about religions’ holidays in order to increase awareness of the many religions practiced in the United States. Insight into the similarities and differences between religions is slowly leading to greater understanding and appreciation of the religions.

Again, while religious holidays play an important part in the lives of Americans, particular religious observances are not endorsed by the United States government. Although the government recognizes Christmas as a federal holiday, it does not promote the religious nature of any holiday. Rather, its role is to protect the right of every American to worship as he or she chooses. (For more on this role, see the paper on church-state separation.) Most Americans follow some religion and realize that the vast majority of their fellow citizens do the same; therefore, they respect the observation of the practices and celebrations of various traditions, including holidays, as the exercise of religious freedom.

DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE

Like religious people the world over, American Christians often struggle to live out their faith in the context of their society. At first glance, it might seem that believers would be more likely to engage in conservative forms of social behavior than the non-religious. Non-believers, by contrast, might be thought to be more willing to adapt to the innovative and the new, when such trends appear to challenge the traditional beliefs associated with religion. These ideas reflect the correct assumption that religious beliefs drive religious practices. However, as a categorical statement, the idea that to be religious in the United States is to be socially conservative is false.

The idea that to be religious is to be conservative may accurately describe the attitudes of some American Christian groups who believe they honor religious and social traditions by objecting to certain modern social practices: evangelicals who frown upon two-income families and divorce, for example, or Catholic bishops who condemn homosexuality and the use of birth control. But in other ways, these very groups prove quite non-traditional. Evangelicals who promote the “traditional” nuclear family also embrace the use of rock music in their worship services; Catholics prefer a traditional liturgy even as they advocate progressive ideas about social justice and the common good; both groups strongly discourage divorce, yet divorce occurs as frequently among these groups as among the general American population. Clearly, religious and social conservatism do not always go hand in hand.

This section addresses this complex cultural-religious dynamic by describing the Christian ideas of sin and grace, relating Christian religious and ethical ideals to the actual practices of American Christians as illustrated by the example of marriage and divorce, and discussing the level of biblical literacy among American Christians. The American cultural influences of innovation, voluntarism, and individualism on religious practices will be evident throughout.

Sin and Grace

The concepts of sin and grace are central to Christian self-understanding and religious practice. They played a central role in the lives of the earliest American colonists, many of whom came to these shores in order to practice their religion freely and understood the country they eventually founded to be favored with God’s grace. This subsection gives an overview of the concepts of sin and grace and describes how they function in the everyday lives of Christians.

Christians believe that all persons are affected by original sin, a basic tendency to turn away from God. Thus, every person has sinned and is unworthy of God’s forgiveness. But through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus—the Son of God, who never sinned—offers God’s forgiveness to all people. The merciful grace of God not only makes possible the forgiveness of sins, it also makes possible human acceptance of that forgiveness. Those who accept this forgiveness by grace through faith in Jesus may hope for salvation, which means to spend eternity with God.

Christians who believe they are “saved” do not believe that they no longer sin. Jesus takes away the effects of—or punishments for—sin, but this does not eliminate sin itself. This will be obvious to anyone who observes the imperfect lives Christians lead: many Christians are not any kinder or less selfish than the average non-Christian. Nevertheless, because gratitude for God’s gracious forgiveness of sins is central to Christian faith, Christians believe they are called not only to forgive one another’s sins but also to strive incessantly to be less sinful.

Christians deal with the continuing reality of sin in various ways. Some liturgical worship services include a formal acknowledgement of the personal and communal sinfulness of the attendees. In addition, Roman Catholics practice the sacrament of reconciliation. In this sacrament, the people confess their sins either individually to a priest or silently in a group reconciliation service. The celebrant absolves the people of their sins and assigns a “penance” or action to demonstrate repentance, usually reciting prayers or performing acts of contrition towards those one has wronged. In a less formal practice, some Protestant Christians participate in “accountability groups” or have “accountability partners” with whom they discuss their struggles to overcome their sinful tendencies and live a more Christian life.

These practices emphasize personal and communal rejection of sin and encourage efforts to grow in holiness. In these ways, Christians acknowledge that they are sinners and strive to change for the better. They believe they cannot accomplish this through their own efforts, but they can do so through God’s grace. Only in heaven will people be transformed so that they truly sin no more.

While sin and grace still play a significant role in the lives of Christians, this role has gradually become more nominal in American culture. The traditional American cultural emphasis on individualism and self-reliance leads many people to think that they can make up for any mistake simply by regretting it or by performing a recompensatory action, such as paying money to a crime victim. This attitude has affected religious faith as well. Sometimes Christians seem to think that because God forgives them, their sins do not really matter. Moreover, because of the individualistic and voluntaristic approach to religious faith in the United States, many Christians see sin as only a personal problem to be solved on the individual level. The traditional understanding of sin as communal has been largely forgotten in American culture.

Some scholars believe that this weakened understanding of sin has impoverished the Christian ability to speak compellingly about social ills. A robust doctrine of sin would enable Christians to address issues such as poverty and genocide as problems that need to be addressed not only by changing individual minds and hearts but also on a societal level. Generally speaking, the Roman Catholic tradition, which sees the church as a community of believers and society as charged with maintaining the common good, has been more successful in maintaining such a doctrine of sin than Protestant denominations that stress a more individualized faith. Thus, while sin and grace continue to play an important role in Christian life, some people argue that taking these concepts more seriously would benefit not only individual Christians and churches but also American society in general.

What then is the relationship between traditional doctrines such as sin and grace and the everyday practice of Christianity in the United States? The next subsection addresses this question.

Christian Ideals and Social Practices

As noted above, the worship practices of many conservative Protestants are non-traditional. The same may be said of Christians' personal behavior. The large group of American Protestants who consider themselves to be "religious conservatives"—up to a quarter of the country's population, by some estimates—are in many ways no more or less inclined to embrace "traditional" religious or social practices than their liberal or non-religious peers.

Religiously, the concept of being "born again" is the central feature of Christian and especially evangelical faith. One is not considered a Christian until one has been "born again," meaning that one has actively chosen to accept Jesus Christ as one's personal savior. But this does not mean uncritically adopting the established traditions of one's church. Moreover, the significance of the event may be nuanced differently in different denominations. Evangelical Christians tend to see this rebirth as the forging of a new, intensely personal faith, whereas Catholics use the language of rebirth to emphasize that new members of the church are newly born into the living tradition of the church. In no Christian churches is passively adopting the faith of one's parents sufficient; mature, personal faith is required to take one's place in the community as an adult Christian.

Socially, while Christians, especially those who consider themselves to be conservative, have high

moral standards with serious theological underpinnings, most tend to act like the rest of Americans when it comes to morality. Some groups, especially the Mormons, have managed to uphold conservative religious and social practices within their communities, but they are a small minority. Marriage and divorce provide a telling example of this phenomenon. Catholics and evangelicals both regard marriage as a lifelong commitment and divorce as a great evil. Evangelicals attach great shame to divorce, while Catholics who wish to remarry must go through a lengthy and tedious "annulment" process in order to have their church recognize their new marriage. Despite the strong prohibitions of divorce in these religious communities, these groups have divorce rates that are similar to those of the general population. In fact, politically conservative states with high percentages of evangelical residents, such as Oklahoma and Arkansas, have high rates of divorce compared to politically liberal states with low percentages of evangelical residents, such as Connecticut and Massachusetts.

Why do marriages among Christians such as evangelicals and Catholics commonly end in divorce, even though these groups consider divorce sinful? Part of the answer deals with economics: evangelicals are statistically more likely to be poor, and divorce rates are higher among the poor. The answer also involves certain Christian lifestyle choices that may be considered "traditional." People who are conservative in their religious beliefs tend to marry younger and have high expectations for married life. When their marriages run into trouble, although they often seek out pastoral counseling, they may shun professional help in favor of prayer. These factors can lead to higher rates of divorce.

One of the reasons Christians place such a high value on marriage is because marital fidelity is advocated in the Bible, particularly in the teachings of Jesus. The next subsection comments upon the extent to which the Bible affects the everyday lives of Christians.

Biblical Literacy

As noted, Christian religious practices are dynamically related to beliefs. Historically, the vast majority of ordinary Christian believers have been illiterate, so that they could not read the Bible for themselves; they have naturally lacked scriptural and theological sophistication. Church leaders, however, were typically highly educated in scripture and Christian doctrine, so they could maintain a close relationship between beliefs and worship practices. More recently, the overall level of education among ordinary believers—especially in the United States—has risen. But because this is officially a secular country, knowledge of the Bible has not necessarily increased correspondingly. Further, some denominations no longer require extensive formal theological training as preparation for ministerial leadership. As a result, contemporary American Christians still tend to be ill-informed about the Bible and the official doctrines of their churches. This is referred to as “biblical illiteracy.”

In particular, American evangelicalism contains a strain of anti-intellectualism that dates back to the early nineteenth century. While its most salient contemporary heirs are Christian fundamentalists and Pentecostals, some other evangelicals also view theological training with suspicion because they believe it can interfere with their reading of the Bible.

These circumstances are changing the relationship between belief and practice. Many religious practices are now less informed by scripture, creedal statements, or theological reasoning than by personal faith, which frequently rests upon emotion and feeling. The personal prayers of a Christian who is not conversant with the scriptural concepts of sin and grace are likely to be quite different from those of one who is familiar with them. The same is true of one’s participation in worship services: if one understands the scriptural warrant for and theological intent of a certain practice, one experiences it differently. Increasingly, however, as seen above, cultural trends rather than scriptural and theological concerns are shaping worship practices.

In some denominations, however, biblical literacy is on the rise. Many Catholic and Protestant churches, especially in evangelical denominations, encourage individual and group Bible study. Some denominations, especially the Roman Catholic church, boast a growing number of trained scholar-theologians who remain laypersons rather than becoming pastors. Increasing numbers of clergy and laypersons are making connections between scriptural concepts and ordinary life. American Christians demonstrate a growing desire for accessible presentations of theological concepts and their foundations in scripture. This is evident in the widespread interest in movies like *The Passion of the Christ* and books like *The Da Vinci Code*. Given their lack of biblical knowledge, many American Christians have trouble distinguishing between historically accepted Christian ideas and fictional portrayals of religious events. Nevertheless, as American Christians take more responsibility for their faith—consciously or unconsciously acting in

accord with the American cultural ideal of voluntarism—biblical literacy may well increase.

Clearly, the relationship between Christian beliefs and Christian worship and social practices is complex and dynamic, and it is deeply affected by the American cultural ideals of voluntarism,

innovation, and individualism. While some of these practices appear non-traditional, they and their roots in tradition—variously interpreted—are extremely important to American Christians. The next section discusses how Americans, both Christians and people of other religions, go about sharing their faith with others.

WITNESS

Some religions emphasize much more than others the importance of converting other people to their faith. Among Christians, those who place the strongest emphasis on doing so are aptly called evangelicals. Evangelicals regularly witness to their faith, or “evangelize,” taking advantage of every possibility to share it with others. The name “evangelical” is derived from the Greek word *evangelium*, meaning “good news;” the good news to be spread is the Gospel, the story of Jesus. Christians who believe eternal salvation is only possible through faith in Jesus consider it an act of mercy and love to introduce others to Jesus. American Christians evangelize in a variety of ways that are influenced by American culture. This section describes direct evangelism, lifestyle evangelism, distant evangelism, and comparative ideas of witness across religions.

Direct Evangelism

The traditional style of Christian witness is direct evangelism: announcing one’s faith to people one meets. Some believers will initiate conversations about Jesus with strangers, often handing out free Bibles or other religious texts. This may be done by missionaries or by ordinary Christians in the context of their daily lives. Many Americans are

familiar with answering a knock on the door to find Jehovah’s Witness or Mormon missionaries seeking the opportunity to share their faith. This personal approach can be very effective.

However, in the United States today, as in many areas of the world, many people see direct evangelism as obnoxious or annoying, insensitive to the beliefs of non-Christians, or an invasion of personal privacy. As with other forms of religious practice, therefore, new styles of evangelism have emerged, seeking to accommodate the demands of American culture.

Lifestyle Evangelism

One newer form of evangelism is called “lifestyle evangelism.” This is encouraged for Christians who are reluctant to share their faith experience directly, whether this reluctance comes from respect for privacy, the desire not to discourage people from adopting religious faith by being obnoxious, or shyness. Lifestyle evangelists attempt to be a model Christians whom others will want to emulate; they try to act in ways that convey how important Jesus is to them. They may show concern to people who are struggling or meet difficult situations with a smile and a

positive attitude. Then, when asked what makes them so happy, peaceful, or strong, they interpret the question as an invitation to talk about their faith. Lifestyle evangelism also includes inviting friends and acquaintances to attend worship services. Some American churches, particularly the Roman Catholic church, encourage their members to engage in lifestyle evangelism.

Distant Evangelism

Another kind of witness can be called “distant evangelism.” Here, relatively impersonal means of communication are used to spread the Gospel. Television is one such medium. Despite a series of scandals involving “televangelists” in the past, preaching on television is undergoing a resurgence in the United States. The internet also offers new ways of spreading the Gospel message. Evangelical Protestants have long been avid users of technology, which is evolving rapidly in the modern world. As new modes of communication become available, evangelicals are quick to utilize them, showing great imagination in creating on-line chat groups and other ways of reaching people through virtual communities. Although these methods may be seen as less personal than direct evangelism, they are often very effective.

Witness Across the Religions

Considerable differences remain among religions in the United States concerning the obligation to

witness to one’s faith. For example, Jews have historically insisted that converts undergo rigorous education in order to become Jews, and they remain relatively uninterested in actively recruiting new members. This may be changing as the number of Jews in the United States decreases, leading some Jewish clergy to be more welcoming to non-Jewish spouses. Also, although many African-Americans have converted from Christianity to Islam, American Muslims in general do not judge the value of their faith by how many recruits it gains. And American Catholics, members of the largest Christian denomination in the United States, tend towards lifestyle rather than direct evangelism, as described above; moreover, the Roman Catholic Church requires a one- to two-year educational program for adults who wish to join it. These approaches reflect not only tendencies within the religions themselves but also awareness of the culture in which they are being practiced.

Because they continue to place a premium upon direct evangelism, evangelical Protestants could be seen as more resistant to American culture than other religious groups. But by adopting technology and lifestyle evangelism to witness to their faith, evangelicals too demonstrate how American culture influences all aspects of religious practice.

RELIGION AND POLITICS

One specific form of witness relates to the nature and scope of a religious community’s engagement in political life. The separation of

church and state—a core principle of American democracy—has never precluded the integration of religion and politics. On the contrary,

religious groups have played an important role in American political history not only during colonial times, but also as part of the debates regarding slavery, universal suffrage, (alcohol) prohibition, civil rights and, more recently, abortion and gay marriage. This section illustrates some of the most notable recent examples of political engagement undertaken as a form of religious practice.

Engagement in politics and civic life can take many forms among religious believers, including a rejection of political activity itself. For example, a Christian denomination known as the Amish separate themselves from mainstream culture, living as exemplars of traditional life without modern technology and the moral corruption that they believe attends it. They rarely vote, are legally exempt from paying most taxes (because they generally refuse financial assistance of all sorts from the government), and reject the use of violence by the police and military alike. The Amish rejection of political engagement is a form of religious witness to the wider world; they further their pacifist ends by setting an example of peaceable living rather than by directly seeking to influence a particular government policy. They are the exception, however; most religious groups—including other pacifists such as Mennonites and Quakers—actively engage with the wider culture in myriad ways.

One of the most interesting phenomena of recent political history has been the role of evangelical Protestants in the success of the Republican Party. In 1979, Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority, a political advocacy group that campaigned against abortion and state recognition of homosexuality, advanced a

particular vision of the nuclear family (mother, father, and children) as essential to society, and promoted censorship of media outlets that promoted an “anti-family” agenda. This group was influential throughout the 1980s and led to the formation of the Christian Coalition of America, founded in 1989 by Pat Robertson. The Christian Coalition played a prominent role in the 1994 mid-term congressional elections when the Republican Party won control of both houses of Congress for the first time in forty years. The Christian Coalition spent \$2 million to support the Republican Party's 10-point legislative agenda, known as the Contract with America. A few months after the election, the Christian Coalition presented its own legislative agenda called the Contract with the American Family.

These two organizations led evangelicals towards both an unprecedented degree of involvement in politics and a tendency to vote for the Republican Party. For instance, in the 2004 presidential election, “traditionalist” and “centrist” evangelicals comprised nearly forty per cent of George W. Bush's entire vote; “modernist” evangelicals voted in fewer numbers for Bush. This affiliation of conservative religious and political groups may change as the issues with which evangelicals are concerned broaden—some are expressing increased interest in issues like poverty and global warming—or it may wane as they become frustrated by the vagaries of political life.

Another area of political life that evangelicals have influenced is foreign policy. Conservative Christians were a key part of the coalition that elected Jimmy Carter, a Baptist, to the presidency in 1976. Carter placed human rights

at the center of his administration's foreign policy in marked contrast to several predecessors who overlooked human rights abuses when they were committed by nations allied to the United States. As part of a broader coalition of religious voices, evangelicals also lobbied successfully for the passage of the International Freedom of Religion Act in 1998. This legislation stipulated that promoting religious freedom is a key ingredient of United States foreign policy, and it created a number of government entities to monitor religious persecution. More recently, evangelicals have had considerable success in persuading the Bush administration not only to address humanitarian concerns such as the apparent genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan and the AIDS epidemic throughout Africa, but also to maintain the United States' strong support for Israel.

Mainline Protestants are also involved in politics, but in a slightly different way than their evangelical counterparts. Mainline Protestants are more likely than evangelicals to be very involved in social justice issues (twenty-three percent of mainline Protestant clergy responded that their church is involved in social justice issues compared to 10 percent of evangelical clergy who responded similarly in a recent survey), and to be either very or somewhat involved in environmental issues (thirty-seven percent to fourteen percent in the same survey).

Catholics are more difficult to categorize politically because Catholic social teaching—which Catholics may not always follow—spans the customary political divide in the United States. On the one hand, church teaching is vehemently opposed to abortion and gay marriage. On the other hand, it is committed to

a moral role for the government in the economic life of the nation and a particular concern for the poor and vulnerable. The U.S. Catholic bishops release a statement every four years on the key questions of the forthcoming presidential election. In September 2004, they issued *Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility*. Here the bishops referred to the immorality of laws that legitimize abortion, assisted suicide, and euthanasia, and defend marriage as "a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman." But they also decried the preemptive or preventive use of force and "our nation's increasing reliance on the death penalty." They described the needs of the poor and vulnerable as "our first priority in national life" and concluded with a call to practice global solidarity. American Catholics vary widely in their voting practices, depending on which of these issues they deem most important.

Like mainline Protestants and Catholics, American Jews seem to be concerned not only with issues of personal morality, but also with economic issues. In the 2004 presidential election, Jews voted overwhelmingly (seventy-three percent) for the Democratic Party candidate, John Kerry. Muslims, Hindus, New Age practitioners, and other smaller religious groups also strongly supported Kerry (seventy-two percent).

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent American military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, American citizens are increasingly curious about Muslim religious practices and beliefs. An opportunity has thus arisen for Muslims in the United States to educate the public about Islam and to correct the many misperceptions non-

Muslims may have. Several Muslim organizations have risen in prominence as a result of their efforts to do just that. The Islamic Society of North America, for example, supports the founding of full-time Islamic schools and has distributed a brochure to public school administrators that outlines the basic teachings of Islam. Leaders of another prominent group, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, meet regularly with members of Congress and

the Administration to help shape laws and policies that impact Muslims in this country. An important symbolic milestone was achieved in 2006 with the election of the first Muslim—Keith Ellison, from Minnesota—to the United States House of Representatives. If American Muslims continue to vote, run for office, and engage in a wide range of civic activities, their political influence can only be expected to increase in coming years.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to show how the study of lived religion in the United States reveals both the great variety of religious practices and the powerful influence of American culture upon those practices. Religious Americans are less doctrinaire and more pragmatic than many of their coreligionists around the world, and they are deeply influenced by the cultural ideals of individualism, voluntarism, and innovation. This influence is complex and creates tension to the extent that while cultural ideals sometimes seem to threaten religious communities, they also provide opportunities for these communities to grow and even flourish.

American cultural ideals have impinged upon religious practice in myriad ways. For example, the American commitment to innovation and individual choice makes it hard for some Christians to identify with certain liturgical practices that are highly ritualized. But for others these very practices provide comfort and stability in the midst of a constantly changing world. Moreover, the commitment to voluntarism prompts some religious

organizations to go out of their way in order to meet the needs of their members. Such communities may provide child-care services, counseling opportunities, or recreational facilities as a means of attracting and maintaining members. It can be said that these communities stray too far from their mission when they do such things. But it can also be said that these services help to build and sustain the communities themselves.

Cultural ideals such as individualism, voluntarism, and innovation also affect the organization of religious communities. Such communities tend to reflect the prevailing democratic and populist ethos of the United States—which in turn reflects the cultural ideals of individualism and voluntarism—by focusing to varying degrees on the authority of the local congregation rather than a hierarchical elite. Such communities also tend to respect the right to celebrate particular holidays as an important tenet of religious freedom.

The influence of cultural ideals can prove more troublesome when it comes to the relationship between religious beliefs and practices. In Christianity, for example, an exclusively individualistic understanding of religious faith can lead to a distorted understanding of sin that undermines the social dimensions of that notion. Moreover, a stress on personal faith can lead to an excessive reliance on emotion to the detriment of informed knowledge of the Bible and religious doctrine. At the same time, many Christians are engaging in biblical and theological reflection prompted, perhaps, by the voluntarist impulses of their culture.

Some bemoan this lively interaction between religion and culture as a sign that genuine theological inquiry has lost its influence. They

fear that by embracing American culture, religious communities risk relinquishing their prophetic voices. But others celebrate this pragmatic approach to religion and culture as the best hope for peaceful interfaith relations. After all, if all Americans, including Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, and those of other religions or of no religion, understand themselves as part of a broader American culture in addition to their particular religious identity, the prospects for cooperation on those terms should be greatly enhanced. Understanding how and why religious people practice their faiths can go a long way toward bridging differences that would otherwise prove divisive.

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