

The America you don't know

Religion's back! Surely you must be joking. Merely because it's on the cover of the Atlantic Monthly? Why, I go out night after night with power people in Washington, and absolutely never encounter anyone who goes to church except for a wedding now and then. If this is your case, dear reader, let me introduce you to a country you apparently know very little about. It's called the United States of America.

Peter Berger of Boston University says that India is the world's most religious country, and that by all criteria Sweden, at the opposite end of the scale, is the most irreligious. In a remarkable issue of The American Enterprise devoted to religion in today's America, editor Karl Zinsmeister agrees that the United States thus presents a curious anomaly: a nation of Indians ruled by Swedes. So if by chance you're a member of this extraordinarily secularized elite of ours, and never meet anyone who goes to church, you might get something of a jolt from the results of a study recently conducted by Democratic pollster Peter Hart for the ardently liberal People for the American Way, founded by Norman Lear — a radical secularist if ever there was one. Brace yourself.

Question: When people criticize the Religious Right, are they raising legitimate concerns or just displaying bias and exaggerated fears? Answer: Legitimate concerns: 21 percent. Biased fears: 61 percent. That's 3 to 1 for biased fears. Is the declining role of religion a serious problem? No: 17 percent. Yes: 63 percent. That's almost 4 to 1 for a serious problem. As for likelihood of supporting a political candidate placing "top priority on returning to traditional moral values": More likely: 74 percent. Over 7 to 1. Have the Supreme Court and Congress

gone too far in keeping religious and moral values like prayer out of our laws and schools? Yes, by not far from 3 to 1.

Another study, by Gallup and Barna Research, reports that roughly two-thirds of Americans say that religion is "very important" in their lives, and another quarter that it's fairly important. The people for whom it's "not important" are in the single-digit range. Still another study, by the Times Mirror group, reports that 80 percent of adult Americans describe themselves as God-fearing churchgoers who pray.

A survey by the Coldwater Corporation reports that almost half of white Protestants identify themselves as either fundamentalist or evangelical. The Barna data show that, *even outside church*, half of all Americans, white and black, report they've read the Holy Bible at least once during the preceding week. Had enough?

Michael Horowitz, former General Counsel of the Office of Management and Budget, a shrewd analyst of our society, and for good measure a Jew, writes that the fear and loathing now being directed at evangelical Christians by our secular elites remind him of nothing so much as the horror felt by New England brahmins of the 1830s as they watched uncouth Western frontiersmen participating in the inauguration of Andrew Jackson.

The welcoming of evangelical Christians into our political life, writes Mr. Horowitz, "represents an essential chapter in America's continuing saga of democratization." Irving Kristol offers similar comments, suggesting that the evangelicals should be absorbed into our political mainstream much as were the European immigrants of an earlier generation.

Our situation contains a profound irony. The simple fact of the matter is that Christians now called "evangelicals" used to own this country lock, stock and barrel. But far from being "extremists" as they're now presented, if by and large they hadn't received newcomers to America with Christian humility, compassion and tolerance, neither Mr. Horowitz nor Mr. Kristol would be accepted as the distinguished Americans they are today. Indeed, these days extremism and bigotry are almost entirely on the radical-secular side,

some of our anti-religion zealots attacking with all the fanaticism of Torquemada's inquisitors even the tiniest shred of religion in our national life.

The way things have been going, I'm not the least bit surprised that the U.S. Postal Service, at the peremptory demand of perhaps 1 percent of the American population, last year banned "Christmas" and "Hannukah" from all postal materials — to the stunned astonishment of the remaining 99 percent.

Average Americans find it hard to believe that the government — their government — obliged church-run nursing homes to remove all religious symbols from their Yellow Pages advertising and forced Western Maryland College to remove from the tops of their 19th century buildings crosses that had been there more than 100 years. A Colorado school district, with federal court approval, removed all books on Christianity from its classrooms — while naturally keeping books on Native American religions and, of course, the occult.

But the most demented example a few years back was the intrusion of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) — America's real Torquemadas — into California's proposed reformulation of sex education in its public schools. Letters were sent to every California legislator threatening crippling lawsuits if they strayed from ACLU doctrine. What was the ACLU doctrine? Word for word: "Teaching monogamous, heterosexual intercourse within marriage as a traditional American value is an unconstitutional establishment of a religious doctrine in the public schools."

This is so bizarre as to merit exhibition in some kind of ACLU freak show, since monogamous, heterosexual intercourse within marriage is not only an American value, it's civilization's oldest social institution. With national illegitimacy rates at something over 22 percent, you see, the ACLU certainly wouldn't want California schools to discourage students from having intercourse outside marriage.

But a great culture war might be coming between our irreligious elite and the American people, who are beginning to assert their religious beliefs. Get ready.



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