

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.

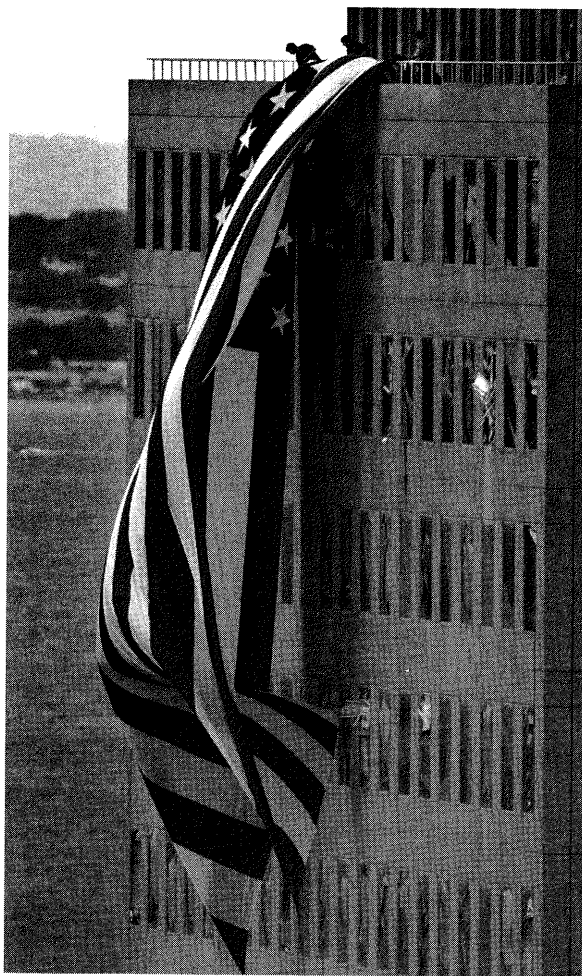
- 21 Some observers of American society believe that the various practices that are called the national religion can have harmful effects, however. Sometimes these practices can help to create a climate in which disagreement with current national practices is discouraged or not tolerated. There have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

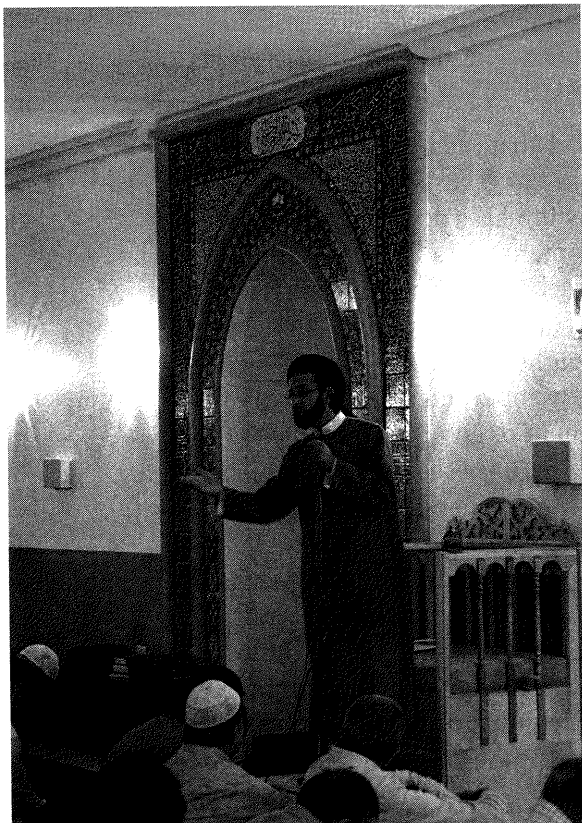
- 22 The religious landscape in the United States is complicated and changing. In *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell discuss two forces at work in the United States today: religious polarization and pluralism. There is growing polarization between 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



American Muslims at prayer

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

Religious Diversity in the United States: A Spiritual Kaleidoscope⁶

- 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.
- 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.

⁶kaleidoscope: colors or patterns that change quickly