



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.

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## 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.

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



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 through

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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*

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.

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## **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





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.

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

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.

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## 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.

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## **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,





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.

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.

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## 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. ItiT.ssMb staidtheatthese coumunities m

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

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## Websites

### *Christian Denominations in the United States*

Orthodox Church in America: [www.oca.org](http://www.oca.org)  
U. S. Catholic Bishops: [www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org)  
The Vatican (Worldwide Roman Catholic Church): [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)  
Episcopal Church: [www.episcopalchurch.org](http://www.episcopalchurch.org)  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: [www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org)  
United Methodist Church: [www.umc.org](http://www.umc.org)  
Presbyterian Church (USA): [www.pcusa.org](http://www.pcusa.org)  
North American Baptist Conference of Churches: [www.nabconference.org](http://www.nabconference.org)  
Southern Baptist Convention: [www.sbc.net](http://www.sbc.net)  
Mennonite Church USA: [www.mennoniteusa.org](http://www.mennoniteusa.org)  
Society of Friends (Quakers): [www.quaker.org](http://www.quaker.org)  
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons): [www.lds.org](http://www.lds.org)

### *Islam in the United States*

Islam in America (sponsored by Dar al Islam): [www.islamamerica.org/index.cfm](http://www.islamamerica.org/index.cfm)  
Dar al Islam (nonprofit educational foundation): [www.daralislam.org](http://www.daralislam.org)  
Collections & Stories of American Muslims: [www.muslimsinamerica.org/](http://www.muslimsinamerica.org/)  
Council on American-Islamic Relations: [www.cair.com](http://www.cair.com)  
U. S. State Department site: <http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/muslimlife/>

### *Judaism in the United States*

Orthodox Union: [www.ou.org](http://www.ou.org)  
United Synagogue of Conservative Ju



This project was made possible by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author.

