

behind were the Associated Press's Fred Bayles and the *New Yorker's* Kelly.) *USA Today* reporter Gary Fields and a dozen colleagues, notes Holley, "conducted more than 500 interviews, examined fire records in every southern state, and visited the sites of 45 church arsons." They found that while there had been a "surge" of arsons during 1995 and '96 at black churches in two areas in the South, there was no "epidemic of racially-driven arsons" sweeping the region. Of the 64 fires at black churches the *USA Today* team examined, only four could be conclusively shown to be racially motivated.

The nation (and the news media), Fields and a fellow reporter observed, had stumbled upon an old phenomenon and mistaken it



The burning last June of Pleasant Ridge United Church of Christ, in North Carolina, fed the media's "fire."

for something new. "The phenomenon: churches of every color are a traditional favorite of arsonists. Although the pace has been declining in recent years, arsonists still torch an average of 520 churches and church-owned buildings a year."

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

America's Foolish Romance with God

"The Last Taboo" by Wendy Kaminer, in *The New Republic* (Oct. 14, 1996),
1220 19th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Many sermons are preached these days about America's moral decline and loss of religious faith. Nearly everybody seems to agree that the spirit of secularism has seized the nation. Kaminer, a Public Policy Fellow at Radcliffe College, begs to differ. Americans, she says, give too much respect to religion—and too little to the rational alternative: atheism.

"If I were to mock religious belief as childish, if I were to suggest that worshiping a supernatural deity, convinced that it cares about your welfare, is like worrying about monsters in the closet who find you tasty enough to eat, if I were to describe God as our creation. . . . I'd violate the norms of civility and religious correctness, I'd be excoriated as an example of the cynical, liberal elite responsible for America's moral decline. I'd be pitied for my spiritual blindness; some people would try to enlighten and convert me. I'd receive hate mail. Atheists generate about as much sympathy as pedophiles. But,

while pedophilia may at least be characterized as a disease, atheism is a choice, a willful rejection of beliefs to which vast majorities of people cling."

She cites a 1994 survey showing that 95 percent of Americans believe in God or some other universal spirit, and that 76 percent "imagine God as a heavenly father who actually pays attention to their prayers." Many also entertain more exotic beliefs. According to a 1991 survey, 53 percent of Catholics and 40 percent of Protestants believe in UFOs (unidentified flying objects). Nearly one-third of the nation's teenagers believe in reincarnation.

"In this climate—with belief in guardian angels and creationism becoming commonplace—making fun of religion is as risky as burning a flag in an American Legion hall," Kaminer asserts. "But, by admitting that they're fighting a winning battle, advocates of renewed religiosity would lose the benefits of appearing besieged. Like liberal rights orga-

nizations that attract more money when conservative authoritarians are in power, religious groups inspire more believers when secularism is said to hold sway.”

H. L. Mencken and other thinkers once scorned religion as akin to imbecility. Today’s intellectuals, Kaminer complains, have “abandoned the tradition of caustic secularism that once provided refuge for the faithless.”

The supposedly liberal, mainstream press is no better, she maintains. It “offers unprecedented coverage of religion, taking pains not to offend the faithful.” In an op-ed piece on popular spirituality that she wrote for the *New York Times* last summer, she was not allowed by the editors to say “that, while

Hillary Clinton was criticized for conversing with Eleanor Roosevelt, millions of Americans regularly talk to Jesus, long deceased, and that many people believe that God talks to them, unbidden. Nor was I permitted to point out that, to an atheist, the sacraments are as silly as a séance. These remarks and others were excised because they were deemed ‘offensive.’”

A little more offensiveness is precisely what’s needed, in Kaminer’s view: “A resurgence of skepticism and rationality . . . would balance supernaturalism and the habit of belief with respect for empirical realities, which should influence the formulation of public policy more than faith.”

In Name Only

“Not So Christian America” by Thomas C. Reeves, in *First Things* (Oct. 1996), Institute on Religion and Public Life, 156 Fifth Ave., Ste. 400, New York, N.Y. 10010.

For decades, survey after survey has seemed to show that Americans are a highly religious people. Less than eight percent in a 1990 survey said they had no religion, while nearly 87 percent described themselves as Christians. On closer inspection, argues Reeves, a historian at the University of Wisconsin at Parkside, and author of *The Empty Church: The Suicide of Liberal Christianity* (1996), the faith practiced by most of these people barely deserves the name Christian.

A 1989 Gallup poll found that only four out of 10 Americans knew that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, only a minority of adults could name the four Gospels of the New Testament, and only three out of 10 teenagers knew why Easter is celebrated. An in-depth survey by John C. Green of the University of Akron and other political scientists suggests that religious faith actually plays little or no role in most Americans’ lives. Judging by such things as church attendance

and membership, personal prayer, belief in life after death, and how “important” respondents said religion was to them, the researchers concluded that 30 percent of Americans are totally secular in their outlook, 29 percent are barely or nominally religious, and 22 percent are modestly religious. Only 19 percent regularly practice their religion. But this lack of religious commitment, Reeves says, should come as no surprise to anybody who is aware of the violence and vulgarity that pollute American life.

“Authentic Christianity and the world are by definition at odds,” he maintains, but for most Americans, Christianity has been watered down and rendered innocuous, like so much fast food. It has become “easy, upbeat, convenient, and compatible. It does not require self-sacrifice, discipline, humility, an otherworldly outlook, a zeal for souls, a fear as well as love of God. There is little guilt and no punishment, and the payoff in heaven is virtually certain.”

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

On Fire for Fusion

“The Fire Next Time” by William J. Hogan, Roger O. Bangerter, and Charles P. Verdon, in *The Sciences* (Sept.–Oct. 1996), New York Academy of Sciences, 2 E. 63rd St., New York, N.Y. 10021.

Critics of nuclear fusion research joke that fusion power is only 20 years away—and *always will be*. But fusion research scientists

Hogan, Bangerter, and Verdon—of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory,