

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,