

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,

and the Laboratory for Laser Energetics at the University of Rochester, respectively—think they will be able, with the aid of a \$1.1 billion National Ignition Facility that is in the works, to prove the skeptics wrong.

For fusion researchers, they write, “this is a time of high drama,” and morale is high. “The traditional reasons for optimism are as compelling as ever. For one thing, fusion works. An operational fusion reactor, the sun, illuminates the sky every day.” A fusion reactor scaled down for earthly use would provide a source of energy that, in contrast with nuclear fission, would be safe (no possibility of a sustained chain reaction), clean (no eternally radioactive by-products), and virtually inexhaustible. But the physics involved in confining and heating two rarified gases (deuterium and tritium, both hydrogen isotopes) to the temperature of the sun is a daunting obstacle to scientists.

There are two main approaches. One is magnetic fusion, in which the challenge is to use magnetic fields to keep the fuel confined. International teams in Europe, Japan, the United States, and Russia are currently designing the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor, which will be the largest facility of its kind. Hogan and his col-

leagues are working on inertial confinement fusion, in which a laser or particle beam is used to heat and compress a fuel capsule until it detonates, with the fuel’s own inertia keeping it confined long enough for the reaction to take place. “The long-standing hurdle has been ignition,” the authors say.

Just a few decades ago, estimates of the energy needed to achieve ignition varied widely—from 10 kilojoules to 10 megajoules. Now it appears that between one and two megajoules will be needed. This refinement, say the authors, “has made it possible, for the first time, to design equipment and set realistic budgets for achieving fusion ignition.”

Major programs are under way in the United States and eight other countries. A French inertial confinement research facility, Mégajoule, is scheduled to be completed between 2005 and 2010 in Bordeaux. Construction of the U.S. National Ignition Facility, at a site not yet selected, could begin this spring, with late 2002 the target for completion. If that schedule is kept, the authors are confident that “experiments would then lead to ignition by 2005.” Two decades after that, they say, commercial fusion power could become a reality.

## Alternative Medicine Arrives

“Europe’s Strong Herbal Brew” by Rebecca Rawls, in *Chemical & Engineering News* (Sept. 23, 1996), 1155 16th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036; “Trends in the Education and Practice of Alternative Medicine Clinicians” by Richard A. Cooper and Sandi J. Stoflet, in *Health Affairs* (Fall 1996), Ste. 600, 7600 Old Georgetown Road, Bethesda, Md. 20814–6133.

Herbal medicines have long seemed a fringe interest. No more. In the eyes of both middle-class consumers and physicians, reports Rawls, a senior correspondent for *Chemical & Engineering News*, such medicines have become increasingly respectable, and may now be on the verge of widespread acceptance and use.

Europe some time ago embraced herbal remedies, such as extract from *Ginkgo biloba*, used to improve the flow of blood in capillaries and arteries. In Germany and France, many herbs and herbal extracts are sold as prescription drugs, and their use is covered by national health insurance. Regularly prescribed by 80 percent of German physicians, herbal medicines are always among the best-selling prescription drugs in the country.



*Echinacea purpurea*