

Henry Luce founded. Do McChesney and company think we were better off in 1970, when there were three TV news networks, than we are today, when there are six or eight? Better off before the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* became national newspapers? Before FM radio and cable?”

In his 1999 book, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, McChesney, who is a professor of communications at the University of Illinois, asserted that just nine major companies controlled much of the world's media. But Shafer, citing a *Columbia Journalism Review* list, maintains that there are nearly three dozen big media companies in the United States alone.

As for the idea that “good journalism is bad business,” Shafer points to the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post* as examples of editorial quality combined with financial success, and observes that “as *USA Today* has become a better paper, it has become more viable as a business.”

Shafer (who notes that he draws his paycheck from *Slate's* parent, Microsoft, which also co-owns MSNBC with General Electric) says that McChesney and his fellow critics of big media look back to a golden age that never was, and romanticize small independent newspapers. “For every *Emporia Gazette* edited by a William Allen White, there's a *Manchester Union Leader* piloted by a William Loeb,” he says. And small, independently owned newspapers “routinely pull punches when covering local car dealers, real estate, and industry, to whom they are in deep hock.”

Despite their many shortcomings, only big media have “the means to consistently hold big business and big government accountable,” Shafer observes. In the 1980s, when Exxon, upset at the *Wall Street Journal's* coverage, threatened to pull its advertising, the paper stood firm and the threat proved hollow. “How would the *Podunk Banner* have fared against a similar threat from the area Chevrolet dealer?”

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

The Rise of Neopaganism

A Survey of Recent Articles

Are Americans drifting away from organized religions to embrace a more amorphous spirituality in New Age, environmentalist, or other guise?

That's the trend in most advanced industrial societies today, say political scientist Ronald Inglehart and sociologist Wayne E. Baker, both of the University of Michigan. Church attendance in recent decades has declined in 18 advanced nations, in some cases quite dramatically, they write in *American Sociological Review* (Feb. 2000). In Spain, for instance, the proportion of regular churchgoers shrank from 53 percent in 1981 to 38 percent in the mid-1990s, and in Australia from 40 percent to 25 percent. The “exceptional” United States—which maintains a relatively high church attendance—was no exception here, Inglehart and Baker say, though the falloff was far more modest: from 60 percent to 55 percent.

“Although rising existential security does seem to make religious faith less central,” write

the authors, “the converse is also true. . . . The collapse of communism has given rise to pervasive insecurity and a return to religious beliefs” in Russia and other ex-communist countries. In 1990, a slight majority of Russians described themselves as religious; five years later, nearly two-thirds did. However, regular church attendance, a meager six percent during 1990–91, increased only to eight percent in 1995. (In fervently Catholic Poland, meanwhile, regular church attendance *declined* 11 points during the 1990s, down to 74 percent in 1996.)

Despite the empty pews in most advanced industrial democracies, observe the authors, “the subjective importance of religious beliefs [among their inhabitants] is only declining slightly if at all.” When western Germans, for instance, were asked in 1997 to rate God's importance in their lives on a scale of one-to-10, 16 percent gave it the highest score of 10—the same per-

centage as in 1981. Americans exhibited a similar steadiness, but the percentage giving God's importance a "10" (in both 1981 and 1995) was much higher: 50 percent.

Yet when they affirm belief in God, do Americans all have the traditional Judeo-Christian idea of a personal God in mind? "One of the most widely circulated and unquestioned poll statistics in American society today is the extremely high percentage of Americans who believe in God," notes political scientist George Bishop, of the University of Cincinnati, writing in *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Fall 1999). Over the last half-century, this oft-quoted figure of 95 percent or higher has hardly changed at all in the Gallup or similar polls. But those simple yes-or-no surveys, he points out, fail to reveal any trends either in the certitude of Americans' belief or in their conception of God. Indeed, Gallup since 1976 has added the phrase "or a universal spirit" to its standard question about belief in God, making it even easier for respondents who reject the traditional Judeo-Christian idea to answer in the affirmative.

More complicated (and less widely publicized) surveys by Gallup and other organizations paint a different picture, Bishop points out. Gallup surveys in 1981 and 1990, for instance, indicate that about two-thirds of Americans believe in "a personal God," while about one-fourth believe in "some sort of spirit or life force." National Opinion Research Center (NORC) surveys show a decline in the percentage of Americans who are absolutely certain of God's existence, from 77 percent in 1964 to 63 percent in 1981—a figure that has remained about the same since. The NORC surveys (which have more gradations in belief and disbelief than the Gallup ones) show that the percentage rejecting the idea of a personal God but believing in "a higher power of some kind" has doubled—from five percent in 1964 to 10 percent in 1998.

"Spiritual concerns will probably always be part of the human outlook," Inglehart and Baker aver. "The established churches today may be on the wrong wavelength for most people in post-industrial societies, but new theologies, such as the theology of environmentalism, or New Age beliefs, are emerging."

Never on Sunday?

"The Sunday Mails" by David P. Currie, in *The Green Bag* (Summer 1999), P.O. Box 14222, Cleveland, Ohio 44114.

Congress is being asked to enforce "the law of God," thundered an indignant Senator Richard M. Johnson (D.-Ky.). The measure before Congress is nothing more than "the entering wedge of a scheme to make this Government a religious instead of a social and political institution." Not an unfamiliar argument—except that Senator Johnson was speaking in 1829. At issue was the seemingly trivial matter of Sunday mail delivery and whether to discontinue it.

Yet in this passionate debate nearly 200 years ago, writes Currie, a professor of law at the University of Chicago, one can see "the whole modern understanding of the establishment clause" of the Constitution, in which it is decreed that "Congress shall make no laws respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

The Founders themselves had seemed



This postman, circa 1900, still worked on Sunday.