

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.

uncertain of the clause's meaning. Did it ban only the establishment of a national church, or did it go further? President Thomas Jefferson (1801–09) consistently refused congressional pleas to declare official days of prayer. President James Madison (1809–17) did issue such declarations but privately opposed them after he left office.

Sunday postal delivery was largely taken for granted until 1814, when Representative Samuel Farrow of South Carolina tried to convince the House of Representatives to stop the “unnecessary, inadmissible and wicked” practice. Postmaster General Return Meigs replied that the post office must operate daily, especially in wartime. The House voted nearly two to one against Farrow.

But it was in the 1829 debate, Currie says, that the full outline of the modern argument can be seen. Although a committee chaired by Johnson agreed that one day in seven was acceptable for a “respite

from the ordinary vocations of life,” it argued that “the proper object of government is to protect all persons in the employment of their religious as well as civil rights; and not to determine for any whether they shall esteem one day above another, or esteem all days alike holy.” The Constitution “wisely withheld from our Government the power of defining the divine law,” in order to minimize religious conflict, the committee continued. “It is a right reserved to each citizen.” At the same time, Johnson’s committee recognized a modern version of the “free exercise” provision, noting that post office employees were not required to work on either the Jewish or the Christian Sabbath.

Johnson and his allies prevailed. It was not until 1912 that regular Sunday mail delivery ceased. But the events of 1829, Currie concludes, show that “the notion that the establishment clause does more than prevent erection of a national church is no modern heresy.”

Why Nobody Reads Philosophy

Bryan Magee, author of *Confessions of a Philosopher* (1997), explains in *Prospect* (Feb. 2000) why philosophical writing shouldn't be, but often is, opaque.

Many philosophers will never write clearly. They are incapable of it, because they are afraid of clarity. They fear that if what they write is clear, then people will think it obvious. And they want to be thought of as masters of the difficult. . . .

It is essential to distinguish between difficulty and unclarity. When philosophers like Plato, Hume and Schopenhauer write about problems of the utmost difficulty, in clear prose, their clarity does not make the problems appear simple, or easy to solve: on the contrary, it exposes difficulty fully to the understanding. To suppose that if a problem is tortuously difficult it needs therefore to be addressed in prose which is tortuously difficult is to make a logical error—one parodied by Dr. Johnson in his remark: “Who drives fat oxen should himself be fat.” Of course prose can be unclear for several reasons. One common reason is that the writer is himself confused. Another is that he has been lazy, and has not thought his problems through before sitting down to write. Yet another is that, out of impatience, he has published what he ought to have regarded as his penultimate draft—Hume, in his autobiography, cites this as a particularly common mistake—one he thinks he may have made himself. It is also, in effect, the mistake made by Kant with his Critiques, in that case because he was afraid he would die before finishing them. But the point is that none of these reasons are grounds for admiration. All are regrettable. The fact that something is obscure should never, never, never increase our respect for it. We may respect it nevertheless, in spite of its obscurity, but obscurity is always a minus, never a plus.