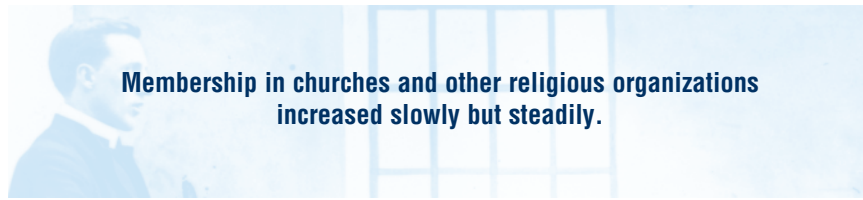




Chapter 6 Religion

Mission room with service in progress. Over the years, Americans reported higher levels of church attendance than any other developed nation. Photograph circa 1890. Courtesy of Bettmann/Corbis.



More than 150 years ago, in his *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, “America is still the place where the Christian religion has kept the greatest real power over men’s souls.” That might still be said at the close of the twentieth century. Tocqueville attributed this phenomenon to the multiplicity of independent sects in the United States, unmatched anywhere else in the world, and to the equally unusual separation of organized religion from the state.

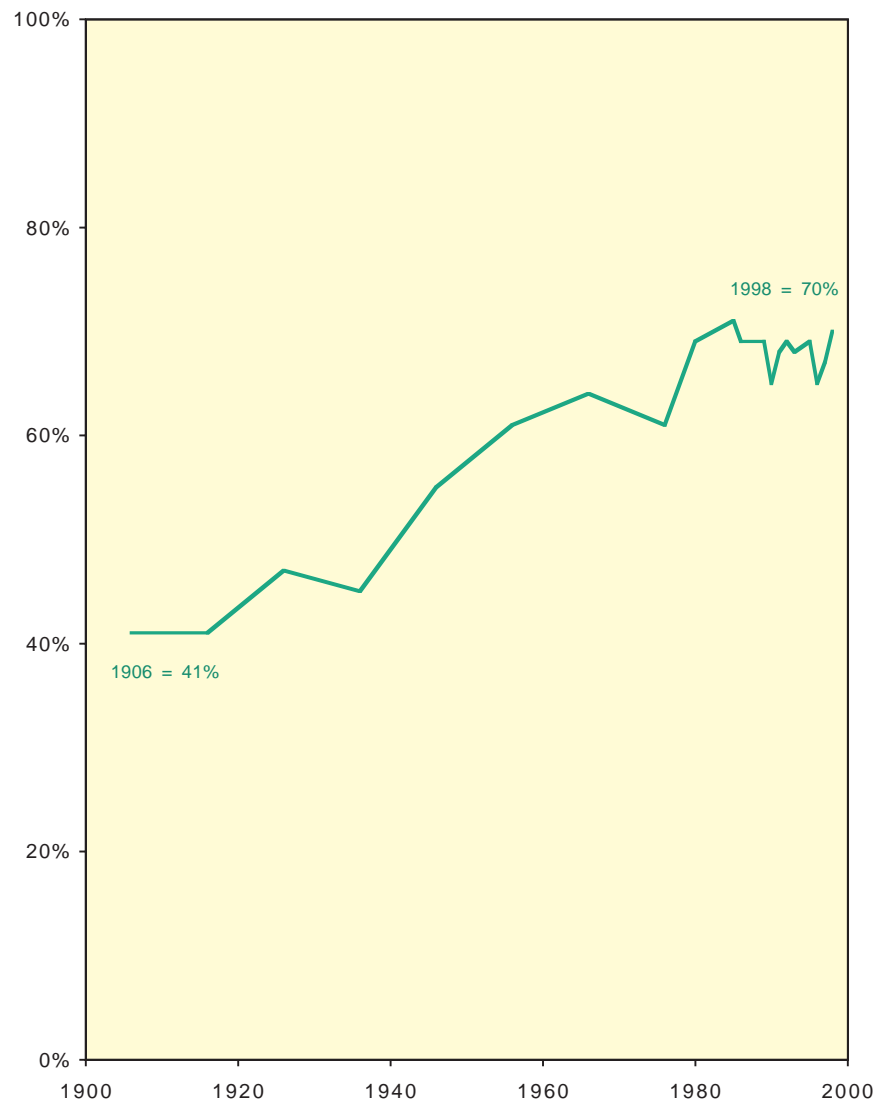
The official count of denominations increased from 186 in 1906 to 256 in 1936, when the Census Bureau stopped counting them. Although the number of denominations at the end of the century is not known, it included about eighty denominations with more than 60,000 members each. Seventy percent of the U.S. population belonged to a religious organization in 1998, up from 41 percent in the early years of the century.

At the end of the century, eight of every ten Americans were Christian, one adhered to another religion, and one had no religious preference. The non-Christians included Jews, Buddhists, and a rapidly growing number of Muslims (see page 112).

The separation of church and state became more contentious in some respects after 1960, as federal and state courts were called upon to adjudicate a wide range of issues related to religion, from the use of peyote by American Indian cults to the display of Christmas decorations on government property. The 1980s and 1990s saw the active involvement of religious groups in political campaigns, along with the presidential candidacies of two Protestant ministers, Jesse Jackson and Pat Robertson.

Membership in Religious Organizations

Percentage of population





The chart shows the relative membership growth of the two largest Protestant denominations, the United Methodists and the Southern Baptists. Although both are large, disparate groups, the Southern Baptists are generally more evangelical and fundamentalist than the more mainstream United Methodists. While Methodist membership declined from 5.5 percent of the population in 1900 to 3.1 percent in 1998, Southern Baptist membership more than doubled during that period, from 2.2 percent of the population to 5.9 percent.

The Methodists were traditionally dominant in “the North of the South and the South of the North,” while the Southern Baptist province occupied nearly the whole area below the 37th parallel (near the line between Virginia and North Carolina) from the Atlantic Ocean to the Rocky Mountains.

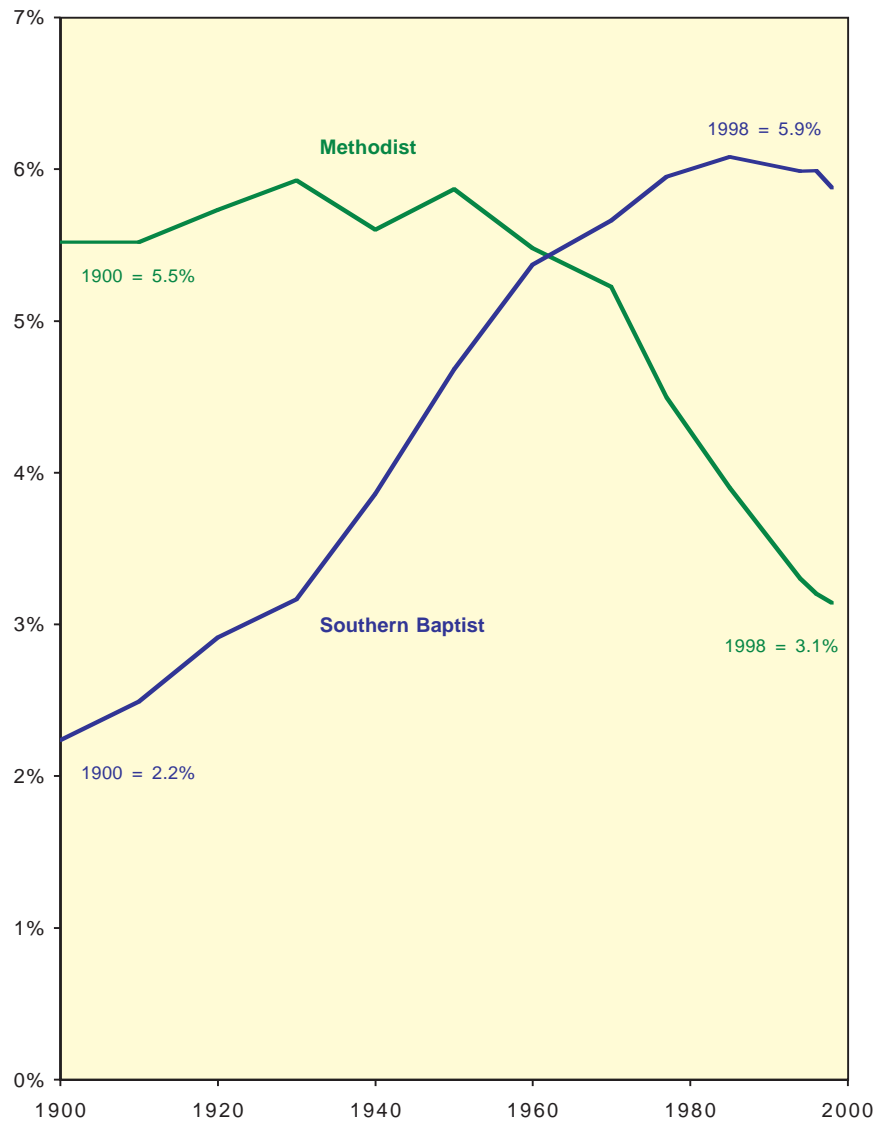
The decline of other mainstream Protestant denominations—Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopal, and the United Church of Christ—mirrored that of the Methodists. All of them had fewer members in 1998 than in 1965. Lutheran membership declined steeply and the others more moderately.

Similarly, the rapid membership growth of other churches on the right of the Protestant spectrum—Pentecostal, Evangelical, Nazarene, the several Gospel fellowships, and the smaller Baptist groups—matched that of the Southern Baptists.

Statistics on church membership take no account of the emergence of the “electronic church”—the millions of viewers of televised religious programs supported mainly by voluntary contributions. The rise of the televised church was part of the shift away from mainline denominations with increasingly liberal views on political and social issues, and toward evangelical churches that emphasized the born-again experience, a more literal interpretation of the Bible, and a “pro-life” position on abortion.

The liberal tendencies in mainline churches, combined with the conservative countercurrent among evangelicals and fundamentalists, produced a marked increase in political participation by churches and church-related organizations. It appears that the liberal positions of mainline churches were less acceptable to their members than the conservative positions of evangelical and fundamentalist groups were to theirs.

Largest Protestant Denominations
Membership as percentage of U.S. population





The Roman Catholic share of the national population nearly doubled.

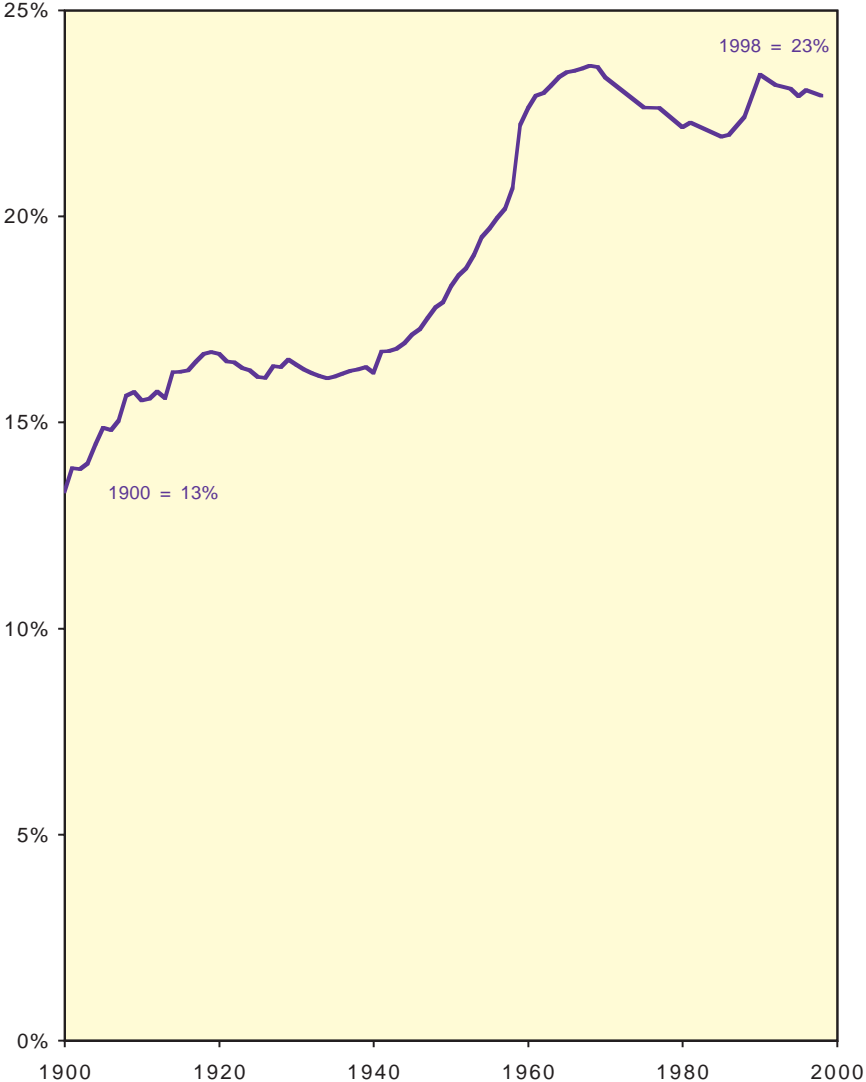
Apart from its natural increase, the growth of the Roman Catholic population was sustained by large-scale Polish and Italian immigration early in the century and large-scale immigration from Latin America in the latter decades of the century. As a result, the Catholic share of the U.S. population increased from 13 percent in 1900 to 23 percent by 1998. Unlike some other denominations, the Roman Catholic Church counts as members all persons baptized in that faith, without regard to their current religious activity.

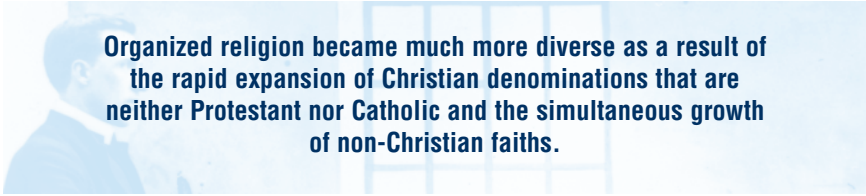
While the Catholic proportion of the population was growing, American Catholics also experienced steep upward mobility. In 1900, American Protestants were more likely to attend college, and had higher average incomes and occupational statuses than Catholics. By 1965, American Catholics had reversed the Protestant advantage on each of these measures.

Catholic religious activity declined rather sharply between 1960 and 1975, when the proportion of Catholics attending weekly mass fell from about 75 percent to about 55 percent, the level at which it appears to have stabilized during the last quarter of the century. This decline was commonly attributed to reforms introduced by the Vatican II Council of 1962–1965, which did away with the old Latin liturgy and weakened other traditional practices such as confession and fasting. In *The Catholic Myth*, Andrew Greeley used survey evidence to show that the decline was attributable to the church's continuing prohibition of contraceptive practices, which most American Catholics do not obey.

Other signs of organizational stress in the Catholic Church included sharp reductions in the number of Catholic elementary and secondary schools, as well as the number of students they enrolled (see page 60). As recently as 1960, the great majority of teachers in these schools belonged to religious orders of nuns or monks. By the end of the century, nine out of ten teachers in Catholic schools were laypersons. At the same time, the Catholic priesthood faced a severe recruitment problem. This shortage of priests was addressed in part by enlisting laypersons as parish administrators.

Roman Catholics in the United States
Percentage of total population





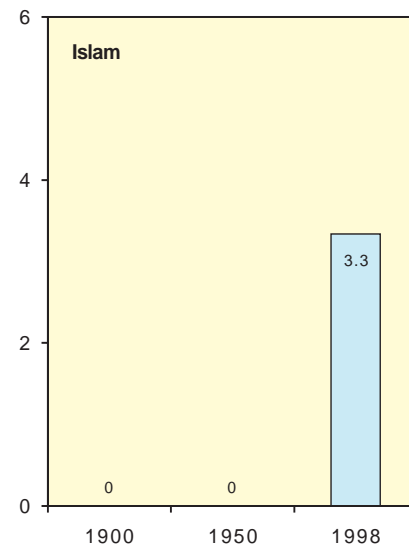
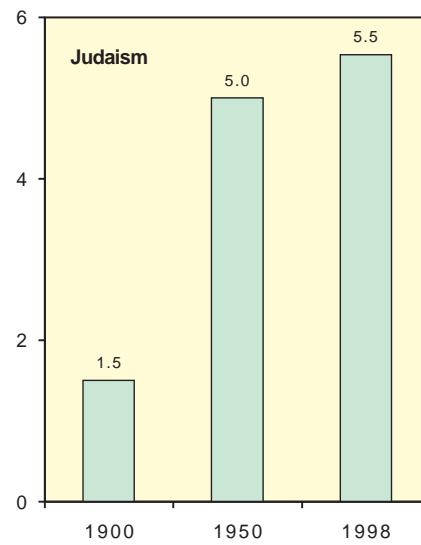
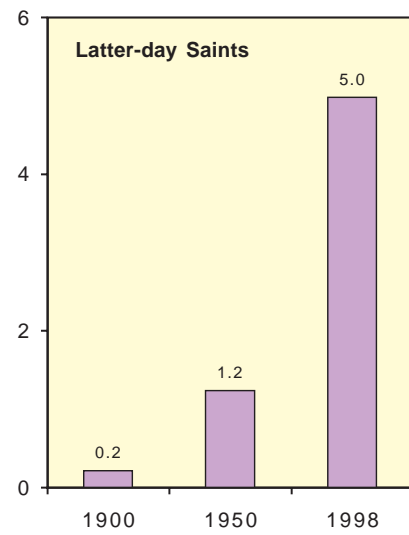
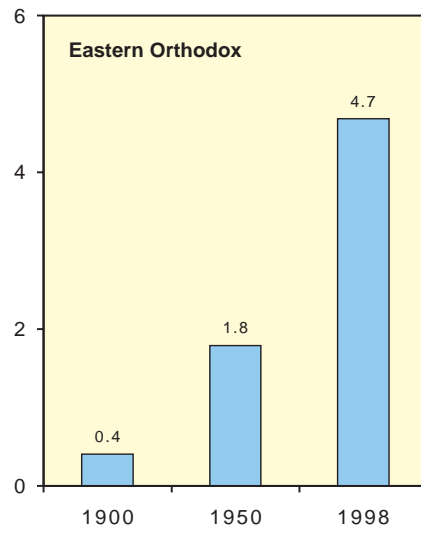
Organized religion became much more diverse as a result of the rapid expansion of Christian denominations that are neither Protestant nor Catholic and the simultaneous growth of non-Christian faiths.

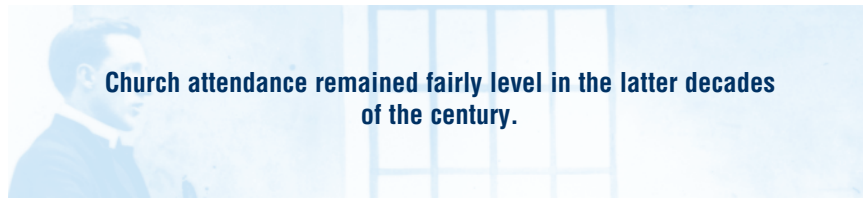
The several Eastern Orthodox denominations (Greek, Russian, Serbian, Bulgarian) and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly known as Mormon, are Christian but distinctive in ritual and practice. As a result of immigration from Eastern European countries, membership in Eastern Orthodox denominations increased from about 400,000 at the beginning of the century to more than 4 million in 1998. During the same period, Mormon membership grew from about 200,000 to 5 million, partly because of substantially higher-than-average fertility rates, but also as the result of a vigorous missionary effort.

The three major Jewish denominations—Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform—combine their membership into a single total that is presented in estimated round numbers. Membership in the three Jewish denominations more than tripled during the century, from 1.5 million in 1900 to 5.5 million in 1998. Buddhists and Muslims registered the most spectacular growth, especially toward the end of the century. Although much of this growth can be traced to immigration, some non-Asians converted to Buddhism through New Age movements and to Islam through Black Muslim organizations. From 1950 to 1998, the number of Buddhists increased tenfold. Muslims were too few to count in 1950, but by 1998 their numbers exceeded 3 million and mosques were being erected throughout the nation.

The charts omit several Christian denominations that are not technically Protestant but seem to fall within the same religious tradition: Unitarian-Universalists, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. These denominations also grew rapidly during the century.

Other Religions
Membership in millions





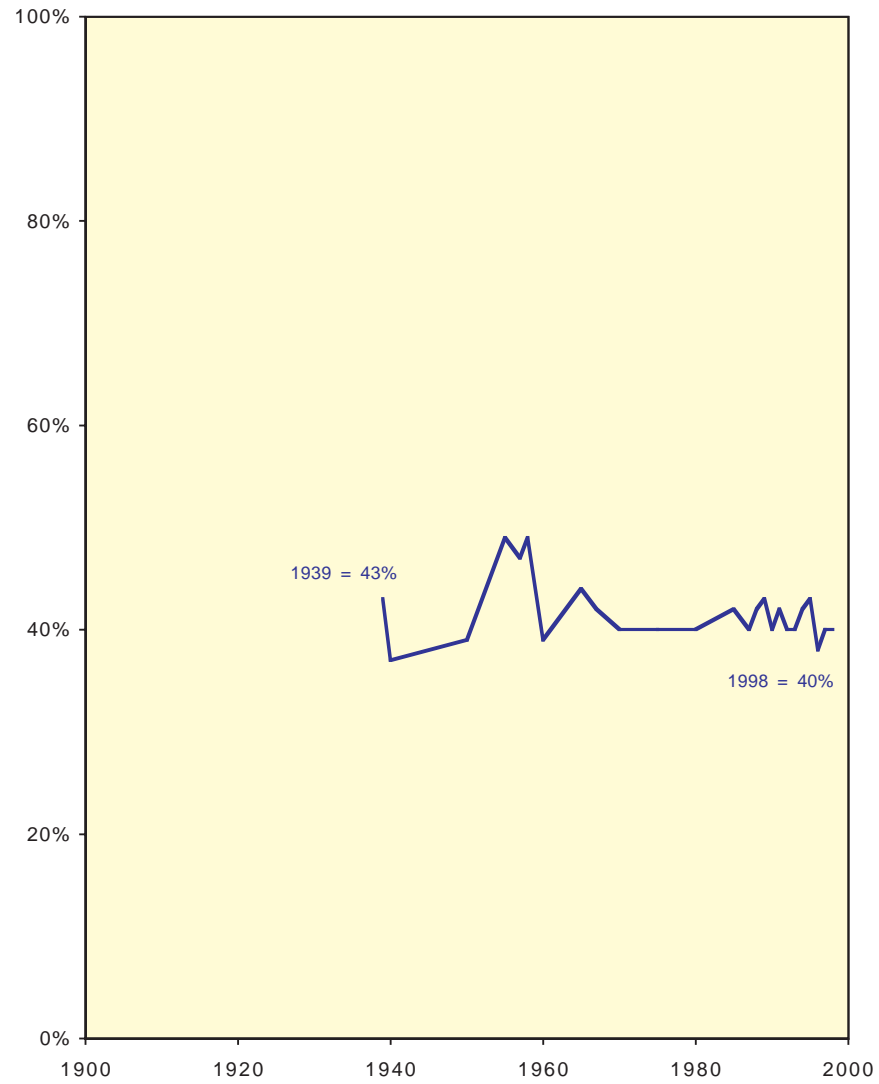
Church attendance remained fairly level in the latter decades of the century.

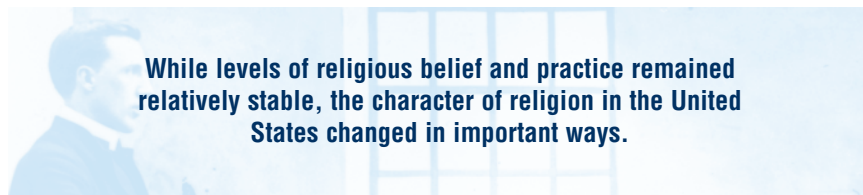
Little reliable information on attendance at religious services in the early part of the century is available. Beginning in 1939, however, national surveys repeatedly asked a cross-section of American adults, “Did you, yourself, happen to attend church or synagogue in the last seven days, or not?” As the chart shows, approximately 40 percent of adults answered in the affirmative, but the responses fluctuated over the years, with no discernible trend.

Responses to survey questions about religious beliefs and private devotions revealed that the overwhelming majority of Americans are religious. The percentage professing to believe in God ranged between 94 percent and 99 percent during the second half of the century. Nine out of ten respondents reported that they prayed privately, most of them daily, and similar numbers believed in an afterlife. At the end of the century, religious support groups numbered in the hundreds of thousands.

Women reported more church attendance than men, and attendance for both men and women increased with age. There was more churchgoing in the Midwest than the West, in rural areas than in cities, among blacks than among whites. But income and education were poor predictors of church attendance. In most surveys, people who went to college reported slightly higher church attendance than those who did not, although the college-educated tended to be more skeptical in their beliefs.

Weekly Attendance at Religious Services
Percentage of all adults





While levels of religious belief and practice remained relatively stable, the character of religion in the United States changed in important ways.

Religious ethnocentrism declined significantly during the century. As the upper chart shows, 91 percent of the Middletown high school students surveyed in 1924 were comfortable with the statement, “Christianity is the one true religion and all peoples should be converted to it.” When the same questionnaire was administered to Middletown high school students in 1977, only 38 percent agreed. When it was administered again in Middletown high schools in 1999, 42 percent agreed, a statistically insignificant difference from 1977.

The majority view that one’s own creed held a monopoly of religious truth gave way to a majority opinion that all religions were equally good—a view that 62 percent of Protestants and 74 percent of Catholics held in a 1996 Princeton survey.

The lower chart, which displays attitudes toward attending movies on Sunday, helps to clarify the implications of this shift in opinion. As recently as the 1920s, church membership was routinely inherited and implied obedience to a set of behavioral rules. Over the years, church membership became elective and behavioral rules lost their importance.

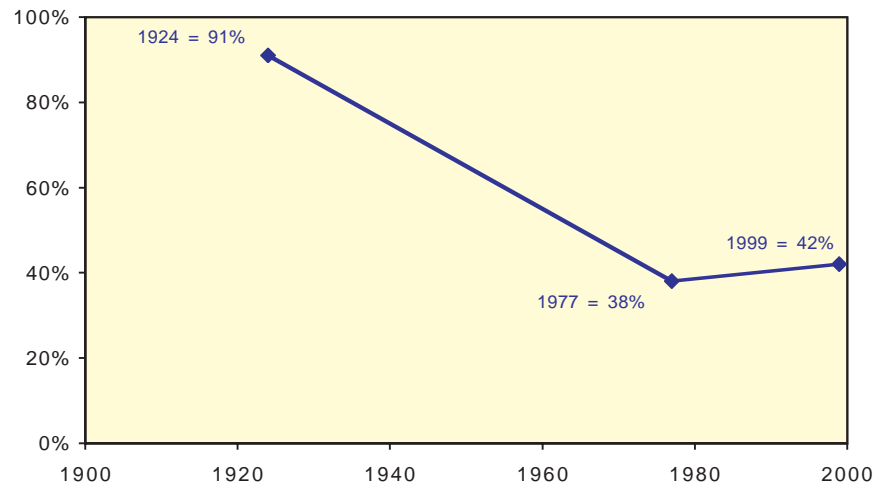
American religion lost much of its authoritative character. The mainline Protestant churches no longer applied their traditional sanctions against fornication, illegitimacy, divorce, homosexuality, suicide, and blasphemy. The majority of Catholics favored and practiced birth control, contrary to church doctrine.

The growth of evangelical denominations committed to biblical literalism can be interpreted as a reaction against this general trend, as the 1999 figures in the two charts suggest (see page 108). But even in that conservative sector of the religious spectrum, some old prohibitions—including those against fornication, illegitimacy, drinking, dancing, gambling, homosexuality, abortion, and illegal drug use—often appeared less enforceable by the end of the century.

Religious Attitudes

Percentage of Middletown high school students agreeing with the following statements:

“Christianity is the one true religion and all peoples should be converted to it.”



“It is wrong to go to the movies on Sunday.”

