CHAPTER 8

Religion

"In my country," said a Syrian physician in the United States on an exchange program, "religion is a part of everyday life, like it is in other Middle Eastern countries. Even if a person is not particularly religious, Islam still affects that person's life because it is an important part of our culture. Religion is not just praying like it is here in America."

Most Americans do indeed tend to separate religion from other parts of their personal lives in a way that many people from other countries have difficulty understanding. We will return to the topic of religion in Americans' daily lives after considering some general information about religion in the United States. This chapter also specifies some exceptions to our generalizations about Americans and religion and offers some suggestions for international businesspeople, students, and other visitors who want to learn more about religion in the U.S. or who wish to practice their own religion while here.

THE GENERAL CONTEXT

Americans learn in their history classes that many of the Europeans who originally settled here were escaping religious persecution. Adherents of religions that were out of favor with their governments were seeking a place where they could practice their religions without governmental interference. What evolved from this concern, when the government of the United States was established, was the doctrine of "separation of church and state," meaning that the government is not to give official support to any particular religion, or to prevent individuals from practicing their chosen religion.

Although the doctrine of separation of church and state is one of the foundations of America's legal framework, it has not resolved all the issues arising from the relationship between religion and the state. Far from it. There are varying interpretations of what constitutes a religion and varying ideas about what constitutes governmental support for or opposition to a religion. Many fundamentalist Christians disapprove of separating church and state, believing the government should actively support their own views and oppose those of others. Therefore, there are recurrent public controversies about aspects of the church–state relationship. Controversial issues that have arisen in the recent past, and in many cases persist, include these:

- Should prayer be allowed in public schools?
- Should public schools teach "creationism," the belief that the earth and life on the earth were created by a supernatural being, and not through a process of evolution?
- Is prayer a proper part of school-sponsored activities such as sporting events and graduation ceremonies?
- Should faith-based organizations that administer social programs such as job training and feeding the hungry receive federal financial support?
- Can municipal governments properly mount Christian-related displays on public property at Christmastime? Can they display other religious symbols or icons?
- Can corporations permit spiritual affinity groups among their employees?

- Can public educational institutions offer any kind of support for faith-based student organizations that require members to have certain beliefs?
- Can Moslems wear headscarves or veils for photo identification documents?
- Should evangelical religious organizations be allowed to recruit new members at college- or university-sponsored events?

For a vocal minority of Americans, issues such as these are extremely important. Whether on one side of the debate or the other, they see these church-state issues as closely related to their country's ultimate destiny. Some believe their country's basic ideals are threatened by violations of the doctrine of separation of church and state. Others believe that the United States is threatened by a severe decline in adherence to Judeo-Christian values.

Although they may disagree about the details of church-state separation, Americans generally take pride in the religious freedom their government provides. The most prevalent religious values are the Judeo-Christian ones brought by early European colonists. At the start of the twenty-first century, the principal religions were Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism, which has numerous denominations), Islam, and Judaism. The largest Christian churches are Catholic, Southern Baptist, and Southern Methodist.

The United States is regarded as the world's most religiously diverse country. Non-Christian religions represented, in addition to Judaism, include Islam, Hinduism, Baha'i, Unitarian Universalism, Sikhism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and assorted Native American practices.

Although the American constitution prohibits the government from officially lending its authority to any particular religion, Christian traditions and holidays do enjoy special standing. For example, the winter vacation period in most school systems typically falls during the week between Christmas and New Year's Day. Non-Christians sometimes complain that their traditions and viewpoints receive inadequate recognition and respect.

What came to be known as the "Christian right," a label that was applied to a set of fundamentalist Christian churches and organizations

that promoted what they called "pro-family" and "pro-life" values and practices, gained both prominence and power in the late 1990s and maintained its strength into the 2000s. Several fundamentalist televangelists (evangelists using the medium of television rather than personal appearances to convey their message) gained large national followings and raised millions of dollars for their causes. Fundamentalist Christians in many communities established Christian schools as alternatives to public schools they believed inadequately supported proper values. The number of parents who home-schooled their children (that is, kept them out of public schools and instructed them at home instead) increased significantly, for the same reason. In several states the Christian right engaged in grassroots political organizing and gained considerable influence in local and state elections and in policy making.

Many Americans are not affiliated with any formal religion. Such people may be atheists—that is, people who do not believe any higher power exists. Or they may be agnostics, meaning that they are uncertain as to the existence of a deity. Many Americans also hold spiritual beliefs but do not subscribe to any of the denominations that make up what is called "organized religion."

To further complicate this already complex picture of religious practices among Americans, consider this finding from a Pew Research Center survey:

> Roughly one-quarter of adults express belief in tenets of certain Eastern religions; 24 percent say they believe in reincarnation (that people will be reborn in this world again and again), and a similar number (23 percent) believe in yoga not just as exercise but as a spiritual practice. Similar numbers profess belief in elements of New Age spirituality, with 26 percent saying they believe in spiritual energy located in physical things such as mountains, trees or crystals, and 25 percent professing belief in astrology (that the position of the stars and planets can affect people's lives). (2009a)

Adherents of the various religions practiced in the United States are not distributed randomly in the population. There are groupings by geographic area, ethnic heritage, and social class. For example, Lutherans dominate in much of the state of Minnesota, the ultimate destination of many early

European American settlers from the Lutheran countries of Scandinavia. Eastern urban areas have concentrations of Catholics and Jews. The southern and southwestern parts of the United States are sometimes called the "Bible Belt" in recognition of the fact that fundamentalist Protestants are especially prominent there, and the states of Utah and Idaho have large Mormon populations.

Americans of Irish, Italian, and Latin American descent are likely to be Catholics, if they subscribe to a religion. African Americans who are affiliated with a church are likely to be Baptists. According to another Pew study, "African-Americans stand out as the most religiously committed racial or ethnic group in the nation." (2009b)

Different religious affiliations are also associated with different levels of income and education. Adherents of Judaism are heavily represented in the wealthier stratum of society, and Unitarians generally have a higher level of education than the average among churchgoers.

Despite the variety of religions in the United States, relationships among religious groups are normally peaceful and are sometimes even quite harmonious. Some religious officials actively support "ecumenical" policies and practices, seeking cooperative arrangements with officials of other religions.

While it may be instructive for international visitors to know something about the doctrine of separation of church and state, the variety of religions practiced in the United States, the numbers of people who subscribe to each denomination, and the nature of the relationships among various religious groups, it is probably more helpful to understand the role religion plays in Americans' daily lives.

RELIGION AND INDIVIDUAL AMERICANS

To be religious in America means different things to different people. Generally, religion is seen as providing spiritual guidance, helping people lead a life according to the tenets of their faith. For Christians, this means following the principles of brotherly love, forgiveness, charity, righteousness, and humility. In a 2008 survey, the Pew Forum used four indicators of religiosity:

- Level of importance of religion in people's lives
- Frequency of attending religious services
- Frequency of praying
- Absolute certainty of belief in God (2008a)

The survey uncovered wide geographic variations. Mississippi and three other Southern states were found to be the most religious. Three New England states, along with Alaska, were the least religious. Seventy-seven percent of Mississippian respondents said they prayed at least once daily, for example, while only 41 percent of respondents in the New England state of Massachusetts said they did so.

Two other Pew studies cast light on the complexity of religious life in the United States:

- Younger people belong to a particular faith less often than older people (Pew Research Center, 2010b).
- An increasing number of people attend religious services not just of their own faith, but of other faiths as well (Pew Research Center, 2009a).

The media sometimes report on practitioners of "me-ism," Americans who have devised their own set of religious beliefs and practices outside any formal religious institution.

Individual Americans have been known to decide which church or synagogue to attend based on such factors as the presiding official's level of charisma, the quality of the building in which the congregation meets, the quality of the organ or organist that provides music in a church, the church's location, or the quality of a church choir.

Many people who consider themselves religious do not attend religious services regularly, if at all. They may attend as infrequently as once or twice a year, such as on Easter Sunday and Christmas Eve—two special days on the Christian calendar.

Whether or not they consider themselves religious, Americans are likely to turn to a religious official to perform the ceremonies associated with marriage and death.

As was suggested in chapter 2, most Americans consider their religious beliefs and activities private matters. They do not readily discuss religion

with other people whom they do not know well or who are not known to share their religious views. Americans do not usually ask each other, "What is your religion?" or "Do you go to church?" Discussion and debate about theological issues is not common outside the setting of co-religionists meeting together.

EXCEPTIONS

There are important exceptions to some of what has been said so far. First, there are certain religious groups, mainly fundamentalist or evangelical Christians, whose members consider it their duty to try to convert others to their own faiths. Members of these groups will readily bring up the subject of religion and will try to induce people who do not belong to their group to become members. It is not unusual for such people to single out foreign students, attracting them with offers of help and support and then persuading them to attend Bible-study groups or other activities intended to gain their adherence to Christian beliefs and practices.

Second, as has been mentioned already, there are some communities—Lutherans in Minnesota, Mormons in Utah, and Hasidic Jews in certain sections of New York City are a few examples—where virtually everyone belongs to the same religious denomination. In such communities people's religious views are likely to be known by many people and talked about rather freely.

Third, even though the American Constitution calls for separation of church and state, there are conspicuous examples of religious symbols and activities in public life. American coins bear the words "In God we trust." The pledge of allegiance Americans say to their flag refers to the United States as a nation "under God." Each session of the U.S. Congress, Supreme Court, and some other official bodies opens with an invocation (that is, a prayer for divine guidance). Some people are concerned about the apparent contradiction between the church–state separation doctrine and these official uses of religious symbols and activities, though most Americans accept them as harmless rituals.

Fourth, candidates for and holders of elective office at the national and sometimes the state level often make their religious views and activities quite

public. They announce what religious tradition they belong to, and they have themselves photographed attending religious services, usually in the company of their families. All this is usually regarded as part of an effort to portray themselves as wholesome, right-minded people who deserve the public's trust.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL VISITORS

If they are interested in Americans and religion, international visitors may want to attend various religious services. Newspapers list the times that services begin, and most churches and other places of worship (except Mormon temples) welcome people who simply stop in to observe or join in.

Students will find campus ministries on almost all U.S. college and university campuses. Campus ministries are affiliated with particular churches or religions (although they often regard themselves as ecumenical and cooperate with each other in carrying out large-scale activities). They sponsor meetings, activities, and services intended specifically for young adults. Campus ministries are often a recognized part of a campus community and may even have official roles in school activities such as orientation, counseling, and guidance.

Of course, attending services and witnessing rituals is not enough to convey a comprehensive understanding of religion in the United States. Visitors will want to talk to individual Americans about their ideas concerning religion. This can be difficult, as has been said, but it can be done. Once they have established a reasonably secure relationship with an American, or for whatever reason feel confident that it is safe to do so, foreign visitors can bring up the topic of religion with particular Americans. Taking care not to generalize too much, they can then reach their own conclusions about what religion and being religious mean to Americans. Some questions to ask:

- What are the main religions in your community?
- Do you consider yourself a religious person? If so, what are your religious beliefs and practices?
- Do you have the same religious ideas and practices as your parents?

- Do your children have the same religious ideas and practices as you do?
- How does your religion affect what you do?
- In your mind, what are the most important beliefs of your faith?
- Do you have family members or friends whose religion is different from yours?