No other country in the Western world is so openly religious as America. The country has a history of immigrants who sought the free exercise of religion as much as freedom from religious and ideological persecution elsewhere. Even those who looked primarily for more liberal and economic opportunities often left behind a cultural context of tight rules and traditional patterns, which were founded on particular religious worldviews. America’s institutions and history, her mission before the world, and her enthusiasm to engage and confront evil around the globe play out before a background of profound specific religious convictions about human life, the rights of individuals, and the rule of law. These were brought into the human consciousness largely through the teaching of the Bible as the fitting explanation of man’s origin and destiny.

The Bible’s account was and is not limited to personal situations and private faith. The multitude of religious bodies, the differences between denominations, the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of, not from, religion has so far not diminished the memory of a biblical view of all aspects of life in American history and much of the present public life. There is one church for every 850 to 900 citizens in the country, roughly the same ratio as medical doctors to people in Switzerland. Churches reach the mind and calm the soul in the
same ratio as doctors deal with physical problems. We are all well provided for.

References to concepts and realities that only the Bible talks about and has introduced to human life are found in conversations, in speeches, in the lives of citizens. Personal rights, the rule of law to serve justice, a purpose to be expressed through changing individual efforts, and a reality of new beginnings are rooted in a biblical view of man in history. Not counting the use of God's name, etc. in profanity, the whole country expresses some type of religious faith, from “God bless America” to huge crowded parking lots around churches on Sundays. A smaller number still come together several times on other days of the week. Uncounted gatherings continue this religious interest and occupation before the public’s eye in the informal settings of private homes for Bible studies, prayer groups, and discussion.

A steady stream of people has come from all over the world in pursuit of freer possibilities than those available in their own countries, including the practice of their Christian or non-Christian or Jewish religious views. These views and experiences are freely entered into public discourse and election campaigns. Present holders of public office and hopeful candidates for future government positions often include their religious convictions in their résumé. They contribute to the market of ideas even outside the church. They are nurtured by a whole industry of Christian book and music publishers, camps and retreats, seminars, conferences, and private parochial schools. What is believed is brought to bear on public life even without an official religious orientation. This affects industry, government, and education. What people believe about the basic building blocks of life has consequences in choices, attitudes, and debates for better and for worse.

Europe has shown her marvelous cathedrals and architectural details in church buildings through the centuries since Christianity spread across the continent. Education touches on Christianity as part of public school curricula, though what is more specifically “Christian” has more often recently been replaced by “religious” his-
tories to include Islam, Buddhism, and other tribal religions. Christian teaching has changed the way people look at life, work, and social realities. Athens and Rome laid many foundations, but Jerusalem gave rise to a practical life of work and art, of lawful rule and the rights of individuals. The teaching of Judaism and Christianity introduced the concept of a purposeful linear history, of moral judgment, and of a hope in life that dismantled the dominant, fatalistic outlook of Greece, Rome, and Germanic paganism. Under Christian teaching the emphasis became life instead of death, law instead of power, and intelligence instead of intellectualism.

At the same time beginnings, invention, and discovery became central perspectives that replaced habit, repetition, and fate. The church gave encouragement, space, and funds to develop an economic, social, and artistic view of this priority of man. It furthered markets and skills, education and a social conscience. Around the teaching of Christianity was continued the emphasis of Jewish thought about the central value of life and resistance against death. The “in the beginning” words of Genesis and of St. John’s Gospel gave birth to a purposeful and linear view of history toward judgment and redemption. Churches and monasteries influenced the land and its people with a unique focus on life. This was pursued through the copying and editing of old manuscripts for the preservation of knowledge. Health concerns for the public drove the search for hygiene through medicinal potions for the stomach such as Cointreau, Chartreuse, and Benedictine. We now know these only as liqueurs.

Europe also had a strong Christian base that was founded on the teaching of the Bible and applied through the choices of persons in the midst of the ups and downs of history. There was never a smooth progress or a distinguishable line of advance of Christianity over paganism. Yet the power of ideas worked a change of heart and mind first. Then hands that held the plow, the chisel, and the sword brought food to the poor and pointed out the biblical view of things in the arts and trades. The mind and the hands laid the foundation for a culture that became specifically different from others. At its core was a differ-


ent view of man, life and death, the mind and rationality, law and rule, and history.

Witnesses of Christianity surround the traveler in Europe in every public space. The churches, the old roads, the enclosed towns and older hospitals, even the museums are brought forth from a Christian view of life. But so are rules of politeness, self-discipline, pride in workmanship, and a healthy bit of humility, apart from occasional and tragic temptations to impose a “perfect solution” for society. Even when personal convictions of Christianity diminish or fail as a result of liberal theology and moral uncertainties, the European will still have the silent, powerful witness of history, which serves, with its Christian content, both as a restraint and an encouraging reminder.

The new world depends for restraints and reminders much more on the personal belief and acts of the religious person, whether Christian or believing Jew. Vibrancy and freshness, personal engagement and activities create a fabric of life. But there is a danger that without outside and historic restraints such religious interest is only personal, and therefore private, subject much more to the changing directions of the winds of culture than to a sense of continuity of truth from the beginning. Church and theology, personal faith and its expressions, ministries and their purposes are much more likely to be affected, even diluted, by what a society embraces as current values and imagined futures. When the whole society looks ahead for what it wishes to achieve, it tends to forget the limitations of reality and to pursue imagination, wishful thinking, and utopia.

The Bible starts at the beginning. There the stage is set for us as actors. Our characters are established in the stage notes of the book of Genesis. Man is both glorious and the crown of creation, but he is now also the child of Adam and Eve, broken and in need of moral and physical transformation. We are not free to start with ourselves and then assume that our best ideals should be embraced or can be realized. The Bible talks about the need for good ideas about life but never presents the possibility of achieving the ideal through human action. Failure to recognize this has brought about the tragic and inhuman
idealisms pursued by “new people in a new world” and also by Marxist-Leninism, Fascism, and the idea that the will of the people leads to moral government.

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) came to America and looked around for a brief nine months. He shared his views and findings in his book *Democracy in America* (two volumes). What he observed, analyzed, and wrote about was intended for a European public very much caught up in the aftershocks of the French Revolution and the monarchist reaction in the first half of the nineteenth century. The fear over popular sovereignty was enormous on the old continent. A Holy Alliance had formed about the time of the Congress of Vienna among the European monarchies of Prussia, Austria, and Russia to prevent the anticipated disorder of people participating in government. Pressure to grant greater freedoms and more autonomy to the people was building up. It was the period of debates and battles that eventually led to the independence of Belgium, Poland, Greece, and smaller regions in almost each of the European nations.

De Tocqueville is far better known in America, where he is studied and quoted far more often. He is frequently recognized as a remarkably insightful observer. He intertwined admiration for republican freedoms with warnings about the excesses of popular autonomy. He wrote at a time during which the ideas of Jacksonian democracy blossomed. Truth about and responsibility in all of life was now accessible to the common man, who can use his goodwill, reason, and an inner light or voice to give shape to land and society. Truth as concern merely for an educated elite, monarchs, nobility, or church was a thing of the past.

Europe at the time went through major struggles for stability and orientation. The French Revolution of 1789 had changed the physical but even more so the philosophical and cultural landscape of the old continent. Napoleon’s wars and imperial aspirations had ended with his defeat at Waterloo and subsequent exile. The Holy Alliance resisted any republican influence that might seep out from France. Decembrists, who wanted more participation and greater freedoms in
Russia, were sentenced to death or exiled to Siberia. In Western Europe the pressure against the old orders resulted in the revolutions of 1830 and 1848.

De Tocqueville is so interesting because he relates not so much any number of anecdotes from a travel log or a cultural study, but rather describes a new world, a new experiment, a world created by men and women who had left the old. The pursuit of change and something new in Europe after 1830 not only gave rise to streams of political and economic emigrants who followed earlier persecuted pilgrims in large numbers to the new world—it also expressed a malaise about the old continent, where the building blocks of life would soon fall into ruin, where old authorities were questioned and traditional structures were weakened by political, cultural, and scientific shocks.

The old continent was then, with some hope, casting one eye to America and another to Russia. Both were largely empty spaces, full of promise and also of risk for people. De Tocqueville went to write about the first, the Marquis de Custine about the second only a few years later (*The Empire of the Czar*, 1839). De Custine leaves us with an excellent description of his areas of interest and his analysis of a historic situation in the West. From it we get a taste of what made it so interesting and necessary to leave for a while the older Europe and to look for alternatives elsewhere. He writes:

All other nations seem to have reached their natural limits, and they have only to maintain their power; but these [Russia and America] are still in the act of growing. . . . The American struggles against the obstacles that nature imposes on him; the adversaries of the Russian are men. The former combats the wilderness and savage life, the latter, civilization with all its arms. The conquests of the American are therefore gained by the plowshare, those of the Russians by the sword. The Anglo-American relies on personal interest to accomplish his ends and gives free scope to the unguided strength and common sense of the people; the Russian centers all authority of society on a single arm. The principal instrument of the former is freedom; of the latter, servitude. Their starting point is different
and their courses are not the same; yet each of them seems marked out by the will of Heaven to sway the destiny of half a globe.²

America was then seen as the expression of the growth of equality and individuality against the background of European resistance against popular participation in government. Russia, by contrast, was looked on as the reminder of the advantage of monarchy and autocracy against the “silliness” of the common people. Yet the detailed experiences in Russia turned de Custine into an ardent advocate of limited government. Both books reveal to us the underlying currents of the two nations’ lives into the future of our own time. They share the insight of outsiders and observe what even to us today seems still very familiar.

Their descriptions are in some ways similar, but with radically opposite findings. De Tocqueville saw in America the working out of a way to irresistibly undo the power of the blood-related leadership by the aristocracy in favor of a more skill-based democracy. He was pleased with the development and effects in practice of the principle of equality, to which all men contribute by their life and work. Yet he also saw that while a republic as a form of government has nobility in its own right, it depends very much on the nobility of the participants to be sustained and to be continued.

He warned on one hand against those who would obstruct in history the move toward greater freedoms. On the other he also saw impending dangers, for such freedoms could create a new tyrant—a possibly uneducated and irresponsible public as a result of an irrational and freely chosen selfishness, which finds expression in a general disinterest in a larger world and in lasting truth of old and in a failure to take on responsibilities of free men and women toward the common good. De Tocqueville spoke of the dangers of listening to self-applause. Here was a door for the weakness and insecurity of the individual, when a majority weighs in with a different position that advances only personal futures. He also saw the danger of overconfidence, when no judge exists apart from us to be a damper on pride,
arrogance, and what we now call self-esteem. De Tocqueville writes, “The nations of our time cannot prevent the condition of men from becoming equal, but it depends upon themselves whether the principle of equality is to lead them to servitude or freedom, to knowledge or barbarism, to prosperity or wretchedness.”

He thus throws a ball back into the court of each single player. Just because we play with freedom and enjoy it does not mean we are free to neglect the “congenital menace of democracy” and forget our own responsibility for truth, reason, and morality by stupidly submitting to the common or the uncommon. De Tocqueville saw, even back then, a danger in the marriage of too much power with too little wisdom. A nation of producers, traders, and consumers runs the risk of measuring most things by their motion, possibilities of the market, and the speed of the transaction and expected future results. What sells must be good. People should be given what they like. Technique and therapy become more important than truth and wholesome teaching. Easy distractions replace earnest discernment. Personal responsibility is transformed by private reveling. Equal opportunity for all opens the door for the use of opportunities to choose between the unequals of good and evil.

For most Europeans, America remains an attractive mystery. Though much is known about the country, its history, its people, its form of government, its public image, its industrial might, and its religious roots, the reality is always more complex and less understood than they expect. America is attractive for its beauty, its freedoms, its imagined and real possibilities, and its youthfulness. To people from an older culture America is a constant reminder of their youth now long gone or never really experienced. Americans find it much easier to express the imagination, the lightness, the daring and childish hopefulness that have been lost in the rough and tumble of a longer history on other continents. Most people there have been exposed to and contained in centuries of a less privileged and more conformist or traditional life.

Visitors are almost always attracted by the kind of things they miss
in other places. Of course, that is a major reason for any travel. One wants to enlarge the horizon of one's world, add experiences, and gauge one's reactions by facing new situations. We go to Italy to experience the sun, wine, and olives, the love of life and children, the beauty of the music, and the art of the Renaissance. We visit Scandinavia to be enthralled by the forests and lakes, the Nordic light, the empty spaces and colorful houses. As the wind sweeps from the sea over the dikes, Holland is a statement of resistance against nature's harsh and uncaring elements. Fatigued from life in our regimented, controlled, and rational modern lives, some might even go to more exotic places and there find a thrill in the native, the primitive, and the other-cultured.

One does not come to the United States on the way to somewhere else. By contrast one might go through Holland on the way to Britain or through Germany on the way to Sweden. One travels to New York or California because one wants to be there and not somewhere else. There is ample literature about the country. It is always in the news. The size of the land, its varied natural beauty, and its economy make it a place to see for itself. One has met interesting Americans abroad. One is attracted by the culture—movies from Hollywood, musicals in New York, architecture in the cities and the museums, which bought whole collections and with them brought samples of the world's various cultures to an audience that otherwise would have little living contact with the world that produced such art in the first place. America is in some way more a culture-displaying country than a culture-producing one. Daniel Boorstin has pointed out the use of such a public space and parade ground as the Washington Mall for a full assortment of museums exhibiting the world's nature and the world's culture. New York has its “Museum Mile” on Fifth Avenue along Central Park.

There are reasons besides mere tourism that make America attractive to the foreigner. Her universities are known for their research programs and institutes. The fibers and threads of public and private interests and funding contribute to all areas of life. The spirit of
inquiry, the freedom to explore many avenues in search of issues and solutions, the self-generating interests, and the private support of such efforts are singular in the modern world. We all admire all this deeply. Any health-conscious potentate from some distant country will, without the slightest hesitation, fly to Minnesota’s Mayo Clinic to get attention and find a cure. Once returned home he will probably continue to express his resentment over America and not promote better know-how or a greater openness in the market of ideas, in order to protect his own unpopular power and rule.

And there is the landscape of that new continent, largely empty still, really still a new world. Powerful rivers, destructive natural forces like hurricanes, icy rain and poison ivy, empty forests and exotic rock formations—nature in all her glory, with all her puzzles and with all her cruel power breaks into the best organized human settlement. And man turns around and seeks to control her. The marks of people exercising dominion are everywhere, laughing at nature’s face and selling safe access with endless explanations, warnings, and fines for violators of safety rules to anyone on foot or in a wheelchair.

Just as remarkable and surprising, but also often bewildering, is the role of religion in the American human landscape. Scientists who speak about their faith openly, Christian literature about a host of subjects, dollar bills that announce “In God we Trust,” at least since Eisenhower’s presidency, and National Prayer Breakfasts are all part of a unique and different world. Not one but a dozen churches dot the typical Midwestern town and are found in both the poor and wealthy sections of large cities. Religious broadcasts of every shade of persuasion surface between the country music stations and networks that warn repeatedly against dangers lurking from the religious right. Advertisements for tires, Bibles, a better mustard, and spiritual health at a retreat compete for attention. Driving across the country one is told sometimes to “go to the church of your choice”; or more selectively, “go to church or go to hell.” One night people are invited to play bingo in the same church that urges repentance by gamblers the following weekend.
Visitors are, however, not only attracted by such delight, such variety, such novelty and playfulness. At times a measure of repulsion is also felt and expressed. There is much to grieve over and to reject. The go-getter, booster mentality from the nineteenth century has marked the landscape and left many ruins of past and failed efforts. Rust and ruins line the roads on which people have moved west. Cities went through a long time of being deserted by those whose enterprise gave them shape, character, and an economic base. For too long they were abandoned and rendered almost inhabitable. The enormous freedoms from the beginning have also washed up junk, waste, and selfish greed. The mentality of a flight from the past, of being on the move constantly, of always seeking greener pastures elsewhere and never really settling down creates a focus on the self, the individual, and on change as a habit. The number of Christians who change their church affiliation in search of better fellowship, kinder discipline, or more entertaining programs is larger then those who remain where their parents lie buried and where they grew up.

In consequence of the American historic experience of migration, of people preceding government, of individualistic responsibilities, private interests take preponderance over civic duties. There is considerably less interest in America in the public space, in the life of the community, in the social reality of people being neighbors.

Communities are separated more often into economically distinct neighborhoods, which each produce their own segregation by class. Enormous efforts and money are spent on embellishing the private sphere of the house, yard, or garden and the vehicles on the driveway. There are building fund drives for the church of your choice. School taxes go only to the community school of your children. There is much less interest in caring for the public space. Few seem to see the trash on the way to the train station or airport. Sterile fast-food feeding places cater to the rushed commuter. Private generosity is considered admirable and superior, but social responsibility is mostly seen as a form of dangerous socialism.

Many visitors are for these reasons torn between attraction and
repulsion, both of which are rooted in something more than just being more or less familiar with the new world. Lack of familiarity often does produce a careless response. But most people from outside develop a relationship marked by elements of both fascination and rejection before one even gets into the finer points of discussion or the memories of particular people. A genuine admiration is often matched to a certain regret that what is so attractive cannot easily be brought into one’s own life elsewhere. At the same time a sense of historic pride, of local accomplishment, of the preference for other human values prevents a wholesale acceptance of the other’s way of life. Room exists for a—for the most part—friendly critique of culture. We are in the same larger family, but we are sure glad to be only cousins, not brothers and sisters.

The feeling is mutual but fundamentally friendly. In any relationship of kin there is this admiration and hesitation between family members. Americans and Europeans remember our common inheritance and as adults now still like to visit each other’s homes, but an ocean separates us. The members of the family have moved away from each other and lead their own lives. Burdens from the past confine our lives, and openings into the future invite us to stretch our ideas and experiences.

We Europeans are intrigued by Faulkner and others describing life in Mississippi or the Kentucky hills. We enjoyed Hemingway and Twain and have moved on to Updike and others. An almost cultic veneration of Harley-Davidsons there corresponds to what people in Europe think of BMWs. We Europeans fear yet also admire both the arrogance and the childlike innocence and daring enterprise of Americans, who in turn admire the awesome engineering and taste of the European and wonder why they seemingly lack drive in other areas.

Visitors to America are startled by multiple career changes in the life of so many people. Opportunities abound to start again, to pursue something else, and to develop a totally new interest, which sometimes includes a move across the country. The individual is at the cen-
ter of his life, with little sense of roots in land and relationships. We wonder about the seriousness in any career that can so easily be changed, relocated, and retired. Americans, again, understand France’s self-confidence in persons and places mostly as rudeness, the British as both quaint, slow, and yet best of friends, since they speak the same language (or almost) and have forgotten about the wasted tea.

Adam Gopnik writes about this so well and with charm in his observations:

Most Americans draw their identities from the things they buy, while the French draw theirs from the job they do. What we think of as “French rudeness” and what they think of as “American arrogance” arise from this difference. For Americans an elevator operator is only a tourist’s way of getting to the top of the Eiffel tower. For the French, a tourist is only the elevator operator’s opportunity to practice his métier in a suitably impressive setting. . . . His work exhibits a professionalism preferably unfettered by customers, while Americans would like to be tourists unfettered by locals. Of course such a place, where laborers are hidden or dressed up as non-humans, where anything can be bought . . . (exists already and) is called Disney World.

There is the puzzle of Italy existing so full of life in spite of confusion, where chaos and making a living are intertwined like the music and the words in an opera, where the church is held in esteem as serving a moral, social, and museum function, even while neighbors chat about worldly matters in the back during the mass.

And how could you be German? Sure, their workmanship has quality, but are all their people rough, tough, and gruff? There are castles on the Rhine, romantic hotels, and cathedrals in medieval towns; but the music of Bach and Beethoven are scarred, as from smallpox, by memorials to the Holocaust.

The Scandinavians are so clean, fresh, and natural, seemingly unblemished by the mess that has characterized central Europe so often in the past. (That picture assumes a certain ignorance of the bat-
tles between Nordic people through the centuries—for example, the Swedish wars against Russia, Norway, Spain, and Austria.) Yet do they not name among themselves both Søren Kierkegaard the Dane and Ingmar Bergman the Swede, people known for their many questions and contributions to make us wake up to the complications, if not darkness, of real life?

The frequent quibbles over ideas and practices between Americans and Europeans are part of a healthy way to discover differences and to think again. It gives rise to feelings of both admiration and bewilderment, of familiarity and critique, of both attraction and repulsion. We are more than tourists to each other. We take in more than anecdotes or picture shoots. We care so much because we are in many ways of the same historic stock. That is the reason these distinctions puzzle and sometimes even worry us. We wish to understand. They arise from memories of a common past, similar cultural patterns, and Christian perspectives. Our closeness easily turns the differences into a hidden criticism, an underlying source of doubt, an expression of envy and admiration.

As father in a family with five children, I am aware how much real people will differ from one another through the years. There is never really a time when one can fully understand a child or another person. My own children always remain somewhat outside me. They are often nice and rich surprises, though grief and burdens occasionally arise as well. Each of them is a real person in his or her own right. They are quite different from each other, though they grew up in the same home and place and school. They are now much different from what we thought we recognized in them further back at various stages of growing up.

That picture of a family describes well the affair between Europe and America. The American offspring looks back to the estranged parents, which they left behind when they fled, or were driven, across the waters. Religious differences, natural disasters, political dictates, and sheer adventuresomeness and new opportunities contributed to that real separation in the past. Europe's foreign aid contribution to
America in the form of educated emigrants taking their skills with them is matched by America’s granting much foreign aid to reconstruct a destroyed ancestral home in Europe, which many had left a generation or two before.

Numerous books have been written about this separation and attraction on both sides of the Atlantic. Any generation looks at another with both amusement and bewilderment. In the case between Europe and America, the children have bailed out the parents and provided for them in their old age a couple of times. They came back and resolved the parents’ conflicts in the last century’s wars and taught them a few things about practical matters, from business to government, when old resentments and tribal habits had taken over and had prevented the parents from learning through the accomplishments of the children abroad.

It is in many ways characteristic of the European always to look backwards to Rome and Athens, to Charlemagne and Charles de Gaulle, to chivalry and the church. They are very much aware of the tenuousness of life in the recognition that the living barely survived until today, and many others before them and around them perished. They know what effort it takes to create a culture and to protect it from disintegration. They also remember how fragile civilization is at all times, for the seeds of disruption, chaos, and conflict also circulate through the human heart.

Such seeds have brought forth great problems in the fertile soil of history. We have seen how prone to disappointment any attempt is to solve all problems along the lines of nationalism, idealism, or other programs for final solutions. We Europeans tend to be less idealistic now and have become more hesitant to offer moral and global solutions, because idealism, dreams, and ideology in the recent past have brought about horrible catastrophes for human beings through Marxism and Fascism.

By contrast the American is young and forward-looking. He supposedly escaped the slavery of class and heritage in Europe and came across the waters to arrive in a land in which he could create a new
world for himself and his children. As the land was new and without
inherited customs for him, his way of governing and of making a liv-
ing—his way of life itself—would be more the result of personal
choice extending into the future than of traditions from the past. The
crossing of the water to get to the new creates the picture of cleansing
from the old. Migrants also applied the events of the biblical exodus
from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea to the Promised Land to
their own situation. New people would create a new world.

A glance at history confronts us with obvious failures; the new
world would be born from dreams and ideals in pursuit of boundless
opportunities. “The only thing to fear is fear itself” is part of the pur-
suit of the American dream. But while this meant in the early days the
pursuit of what was understood to be a life, defined by Christianity, of
educated, moral, compassionate, and reasonable people under law, it
gradually changed to include the pursuit of selfishness, the creation
of a dreamworld, the embrace of irrationality, and often groundless
self-esteem.

Not only would people be able to fly, but opportunities would
abound, and a person would be valued almost exclusively for what he
could do, sell, and promise. Separated from both reason and law in an
age of private religion, the right of the pursuit of happiness would
become a constant supporter of an almost limitless optimism, of
boundless pleasure and unreflected, even irrational personal rights. A
life understood to be under God with inalienable rights as a person
over against the powers that be was gradually replaced in the popular
mind with a life as god with unlimited rights over against the God of
the Bible and anyone else.

Discoveries about each other and self-examination are a constant
stimulus for growth. We learn from the experiences and personalities
of others. I am deeply marked by many exposures to the open gen-
erosity, the easy access to and genuine interest by many Americans.
But my most startling and surprising experiences go back to my first
exposure to Christianity in an American context. From prior study I
knew about the vastness of the land, the natural wonders made widely
accessible and safe for tourists, the generous welcome extended often to total strangers, and the dynamic life of give and take, of buying and selling, of so many opportunities for anyone to be rewarded and to learn from disappointments.

But I was not prepared for the importance of religion to the average person. Everywhere Christianity in one form or another was visibly present in the lives of people. The life of the church was supported and sustained by private persons and their readiness to talk about their religious beliefs. The church invites the public to its services on miniature billboards. It participates in public life with competing schools up to the level of universities, complete with social services and media.

We Europeans have churches and other signs and symbols of Christianity as well. We recognize and affirm them. We know about the artworks found in them, their architectural purposes and their history. We benefit from them when we arrive for rites of passage—baptisms, weddings, and funerals. But most people make little room for other occasions in between. We know that the church has had a say and has strongly influenced what we know of as European thought and culture. Without an understanding of the basic teaching of Christianity, it is in fact impossible to understand the museums, the literature, the legal framework, the architecture, the social concerns and institutions, and even the attempts of empires in Europe’s history.

But the familiarity with which Americans talk about their church, how often they go there, how readily they invite guests to attend with them, how much it is a part of their lives is unmatched in most European settings. It is startling to hear members readily speak of God in their life in friendly terms as a personal insight, personal experience, and social habit. They speak more personally about meaning, direction, and discipleship, but each for himself, quite democratically and as if considering various suppliers in an open market. Politicians even present their faith, or lack of it, as a further qualification in their appeal to the voters.

For the European the church presents the past extending into the
present, a powerful weight from history, a pride of earlier accomplishments and a source of public usefulness, orientation, and comfort. Its teaching is rarely now of specific informative value or direction, even though that teaching still casts a shadow over all of life. It is present in a deep sense of giving order, purpose, and meaning culturally to human existence from the past. For a long time it has shaped our view of things. It reminds us of a call to civility. We talk about calling, destiny, and a Christian view of the person that reaches into politics, economics, and social responsibilities in the form of a healthy humanism. Consequently we behave perhaps more Christianly in public manners, respect, and personal discipline, where restraint, politeness, and service are inherited attitudes, for it is more a community than an individual perspective.

Until recently the church, both a body of belief and a building, has served as an anchor to resist the tidal forces of both secular materialism and personalized religion. It spoke of an objective truth, a real and metaphysical vision of things in past history, against the notion that each person can create a god in his own image, start his own denomination, and rub in his personal faith experiences, much like snake oil sellers did in American history. The church spoke of truth, of conquest of hearts and minds. Her teaching laid the foundation for law, encouraged efforts to pacify the landscape in rough times, and established an order and ethic for human life through the thinking and workings of believers. Their worldview gave a particular shape to the world of man. As a result we now view the world in a rational and biblical perspective, even where a majority of people in their religion are still prone to be irrational, blindly enslaved, and brute in human relationships without an educated personal conscience.

There are then close links between the European Christian tradition and her daughters around the world. What is left at home has been battered by internal and external efforts to weaken her certainties and bleach her colors. Too often she has followed cultural trends rather than shaping each generation with the certainties of biblical truth. In many ways the church has contributed to her own demise
rather than taking in the fresh air of continuing intellectual and spiritual understanding of revelation.

The first poison ingested was the Kantian assertion that revelation was dead, since no meaningful statement could be made about a God who is totally other than anything man could know. A God defined as too high resulted in man falling very low. When there is no more God who can be known, whatever is in the image of God becomes also unknowable. The second poison was the attempt to see nature and man as divine, part of a progressive and natural movement in history. The pseudo-Trinity of the nineteenth century kidnapped that view and made wide use of it. Darwin's theory of evolutionary adaptation of the fit, Freud's description of sexual drives, and Marx's teaching of the class struggle in pursuit of greater justice each expressed ways to show that Kampf and conflict were part of the divine way to shape the future of mankind. When large parts of the church thus had undermined its moral basis to resist social, political, and moral evil, the church had not much left to resist the inhumanity of the twentieth century. It became the century in which God was either absent or had died. Intellectually and culturally people would turn elsewhere to search for meaning—in work, travel, other religions, and many causes in an effort to escape the meaninglessness of a world without God and the image of God.

The light of the Son had gone out in the church. The night sky has only the reflected light from the moon.

American churches express in far more personal terms a religious conviction that is always very important to the individual. For him God is not dead, since he talked to God this morning. European culture relates to Christian content in a more historical, social, cultural, and external manner, often without realizing the Christian roots of thought forms, behavior, and human values that are still affirmed. The American bursts with all kinds of religious convictions. The European travels through the remains of Christianity, studies it, but then looks to other forms and content for his personal direction and interests. And yet, like de Tocqueville almost two centuries ago, we are fasci-
nated and sometimes scared by both the expression of religion in the life of Americans and the lightness of its contribution. We deeply admire such faith and yet have little intellectual reason to understand, much less to learn from it. We are attracted to the pull of a meaningful life and repelled by its frequent and casual superficiality. The pursuit of human freedom and the conviction of moral absolutes are so attractive; yet they are expressed so often in hideous individualism and arrogant power.

That confusing picture forces us to look closer for greater clarity of what is Christian and what is merely a personal religion, a further expression of talking tall in a free market of ideas.
1. Religious Congregations and Membership in the U.S., The Glenmary Research Center, 2000, gives one church, synagogue, or temple for every 1,049 Americans. Our figure is a rough estimate, since many ethnic and evangelical churches have been left out of the Center’s calculations.


5. See, among other places, the long discussion of how the “great obstacle [to discovery] is not ignorance, but the illusion of knowledge,” in Daniel J. Boorstin, The Discoverers (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), p. 86ff. Further on he points out how the lack of knowledge (in geography, for instance, an orphan in the world of learning for a thousand years) was made up by a rich resource of ancient fantasies (p. 109). Often Christians would embroider a sacred world through doctrines and ignore the real one. This is no recent phenomenon, for in past generations Christians would often relish theological speculations and practice scientific and scholarly amnesia. They would approve pagan myths and Greek speculations but be contemptuous of pagan science (pp. 109-110).


The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission is a 1995 book by Rick Warren, founder and senior pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, United States. The book is targeted to pastors and church leaders and advises them to base their ministry on God's purposes, not their own ideas of ministry, hence the term "Purpose Driven". Warren suggests that these purposes are Worship, Fellowship, Discipleship, Ministry and Mission and that they are derived from the