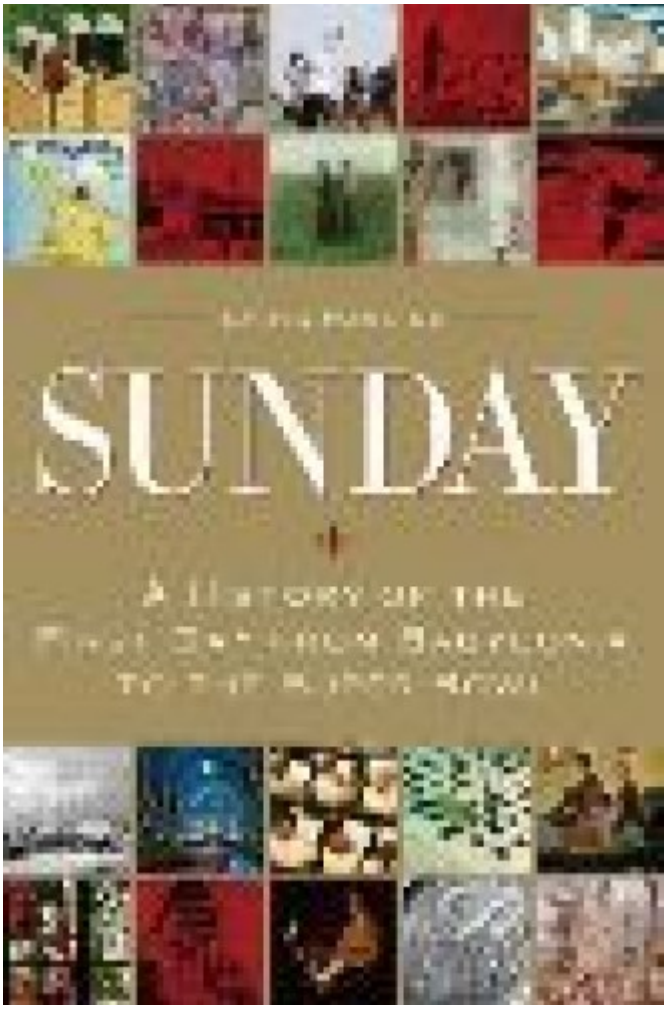
Time out

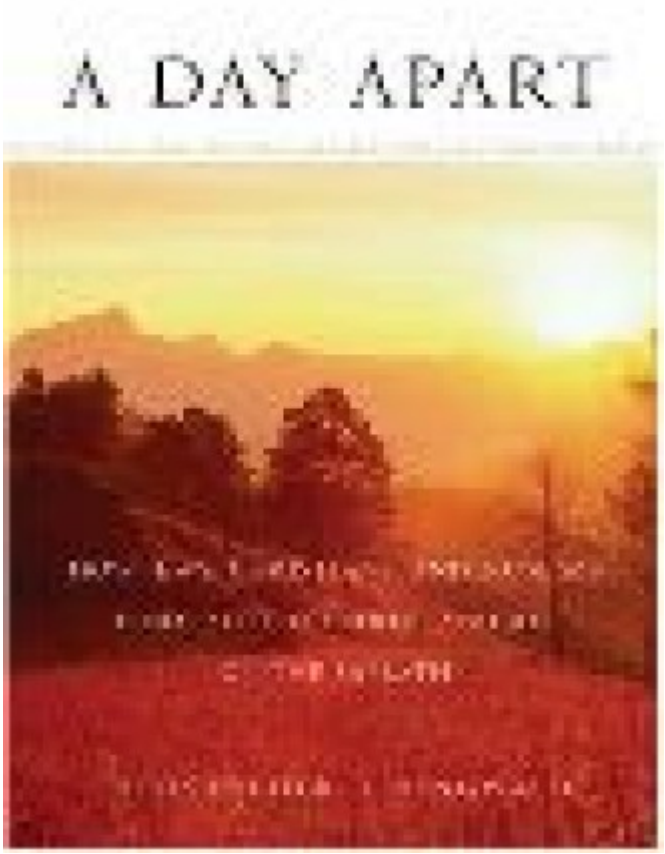
By James C. Howell in the August 7, 2007 issue

In Review



Sunday: A History of the First Day from Babylonia to the Super Bowl

Craig Harline
Doubleday



A Day Apart: How Jews, Christians, and Muslims Find Faith, Freedom, and Joy on the Sabbath

Christopher D. Ringwald
Oxford University Press

Not one but two books about a single day of the week? I didn’t plunge with much enthusiasm into either one. The topic seemed too massive (one day of the week totals one-seventh of human history!) or too passé. But both books surprised me, held my attention, taught me things I didn’t know and made me think. And yet they are very different from each other.

Craig Harline’s *Sunday* is a sprawling narrative with a journalistic feel, ostensibly answering the question of how we got to where we are on Sunday, a day we all care about but for wildly divergent reasons. While he doesn’t tackle the causes of emerging views of Sunday as satisfactorily as I might have liked, the story itself is

fascinating.

Harline does not bore us with a tedious, continuous chronicle of “this happened, then that happened.” Instead, as though a docent is leading us through a time-travel tunnel, we touch down at intriguing moments in history and walk around to feel what Sunday was like. A village in the south of England during a summer around 1300, a Dutch town in the winter of 1624, Paris in the spring of 1890, Belgium on the last Sunday before the outbreak of World War I, the United States in the 1950s: we take in the pace of the day; see where people walked; get a taste of the food, moods, mores; go on an excursion and experience the worship or pious observance (or total lack of spirituality)—everything that set the day off from the balance of the week, the impulses and meanings inherent in this marking of time.

I found myself entirely caught up in each period. There is no hint of nostalgia; the gritty realism of the account is compelling. The singing probably was awful in those dreary Reformed churches of the 17th century, and isn’t it amusing that every Friday Buffalo Bob reminded the children watching *Howdy Doody* to attend church that Sunday?

I wished for more analysis of why changes happened. The chasm is unfathomably wide, for instance, between 1624 Holland, when people attended church on Sunday morning then returned for another service in the afternoon, and an entirely secularized Paris at the end of the 19th century, when mass was regarded as the domain of “idiots and morons.” How did the change happen? Who was the first person who bucked convention and just refused to go to church? Or who was the first woman to sport sultry fashion or the first man to shoot dice on what no longer felt like the Lord’s day? How did the gradual erosion feel to people? Did they feel a tinge of guilt? Or was it exhilarating? Obviously the Sundays of the past were swept up in the tide of the other six-sevenths of history, but curious minds are left wondering.

Harline presents some incisive reflections on the sacralizing of Sunday sports and also on the socioeconomics of the Sabbath: the rich and leisured in every place and time know no Sunday because the distinction between the work week and Sunday matters only to those who labor. In the U.S., there was a “furious bout over Sunday,” and the forces of piety eventually lost. When Harline recounts that loss, he simply states the fact, with no trace of lament. I imagine that Christopher Ringwald, on the other hand, could not write of the demise of the Sabbath without considerable

emotion and an appeal to draw you into his grief. For he values Sunday passionately, and he writes as an unflinchingly zealous advocate for the virtue of observing a day apart. When I read Harline's *Sunday*, my intellect was teased, my curiosity piqued. But with Ringwald's *A Day Apart*, my heart was moved, and I had a curious urge to travel back in time and raise my family again.

Ringwald's subtitle, *How Jews*, *Christians*, *and Muslims Find Faith*, *Freedom*, *and Joy on the Sabbath*, reveals his cross-cultural interests. I cannot recall reading anything on the three faiths that so deftly engages them in robust conversation without any watered-down "Oh, we're really all the same" vapidity. Instead of dialing in to some moment in history, Ringwald walks us around his own neighborhood, and we find ourselves swept up in his wide-eyed education on what the sacred day means to real people in each faith.

But not just any real people. The subjects are people serious about Sabbath-keeping—individuals not so easy to find in our day, when sloppy Sabbath-keeping has become the norm. Exasperated that only a minority in these faiths accept the divine gift, he sadly admits that "The Sabbath remains the dessert most people leave on the table." What are we missing? Writing wonderfully, Ringwald shares the tastes, the music, the silence, the sighs of the day apart. The blessings of the Sabbath—closeness to God, the calm of rest, the formation of community—are evidenced in all three religions despite their formal differences.

Ringwald's Jewish friends, the Kligermans, do not drive on the Sabbath, since making a fire was prohibited by God on Mt. Sinai and an automobile engine requires a spark. So the Kligermans stay home or go for walks. The kids frolic; the adults visit. "It's a joy derived from a restriction." Might it be that we miss joy because we despise restrictions? After listening to the Kligermans describe their Sabbath, Ringwald hung up the phone and told his wife that their own observance of Sunday had gone awry; so they turned the TV off, played with the children and had dinner with neighbors. His clinching remark? "Thus the Jews save another Gentile family."

Casual observers miss the mercy in the day apart. "A God of love invites us into the day. We are admitted by our humanity, not our perfection. We may miss this fact, distracted by the avalanche of rules and regulations in all three religions. Who could live a whole day perfectly? The day calls us to a banquet of time, not a prison of gestures and abstinence. An omnipotent God needs not our perfection."

A Day Apart is replete with history, from Pompey's invasion of Palestine to Sandy Koufax's refusal to pitch in the World Series. And Ringwald marshals arresting facts: Israeli mortality charts indicate a consistent dip in natural deaths on the Sabbath, for example, and when Jews in Manhattan opened their stores on Saturday because of economic pressure, many parents recited a Yiddish prayer that those storeowners might prosper so their children would not have to desecrate the Sabbath.

Amazingly learned, Ringwald nonetheless has a light, friendly touch. The warmth of his soul is unmistakable, which serves his purpose well: the book is never nostalgic, but on every page Ringwald issues an ardent plea not to recover the Sabbath or Sunday or Juma, but to discover it. It won't be easy: "We fight for the Sabbath: against ourselves, perhaps against other believers, and certainly against the claims of the world. The day apart pits the believer against all his or her worldly intentions." A kind of combat is involved, although Ringwald notes a residual clinging to the need for a day apart even in totally irreligious partying, the weekend of revelry. On Sunday, many pay for Saturday night fun "with a hangover and regret—some people's idea of religion's function." Ringwald believes in the power of the day apart so unblushingly that he can say: "The Sabbath rest has been pushed underwater in Western lands only to bob back up repeatedly, often in secular garb."

For Christians, even Saturday has a beneficial function: "Though the Sabbath can be lost in the weekend, the day of preparation provides a useful buffer. To be in heaven, or somewhere close, on the holy day, we need the second day, a day for chores and market, for the mundane but satisfying activities that make possible the divine rest of the next day. Saturday can be a way station between the office and the church."

The book is a feast of elegant expression. Ringwald speaks of "the egalitarian throb" of Sabbath laws and the "contented languor" of Sunday. "I now see the unfolding opposites of the day. We do less and are more, we stop earning and grabbing and have more, we cease from making and make more, we let Creation be and in our repose we see it to be more than we ever knew." In Islam, Friday—Juma—encourages not rest, but worship and work: "Faith must show in works, so it seems natural that the Muslim returns to work on his day apart . . . a sign of Islam's mission to make holy the world."

To make the world holy, to stop building fires and sit together for a while, to rest in God and shake off our cultural hangover, we need guides, and with Harline pointing us to the door and Ringwald opening it, we can enter the day and enjoy the dessert

we’ve been missing.