

*Holy Day, Holiday*, by Alexis McCrossen

reviewed by [Dorothy C. Bass](#) in the [November 1, 2000](#) issue

A large majority of Americans consider Sunday the most enjoyable day of the week, according to a 1998 Gallup poll. Few *Century* readers would wish for a different answer. However, as autumn once again evokes rueful ministerial jokes about ending worship in time for the congregation to get home for the football game, some may think that Sunday has become a little too enjoyable. Has what was once a "holy day" become a "holiday," a day given to secular leisure rather than to sacred rest and worship?

Alexis McCrossen, an assistant professor of history at Southern Methodist University, has an answer to this question. Her book is not entitled "From Holy Day to Holiday," and its story is not a story of secularization.

Instead, the comma in the title signals the relation between two kinds of Sunday time--holy day rest and holiday leisure. *Holy Day, Holiday* recounts the gradual loss of American's capacity to distinguish between the two, to the benefit of consumer-oriented forms of leisure activity.

McCrossen argues that Sunday has stood at the symbolic center of a two-centuries-long debate over the nature and purpose of rest in a hard-working society. What is rest, anyway? How does it differ from recreation or leisure? And what do the answers to these questions have to do with human well-being? The restlessness of U.S. culture itself--its history of fervent economic expansion and individual and national ambition--makes these questions especially urgent.

Building on an architecture of time imported from Christian Europe, most Americans in 1800 observed Sunday as a day of rest. As the economy expanded westward and became more urban, they continued to associate Sunday with rest, even constructing literary images of "the traditional sabbath" to reinforce the norm. Yet fascinating evidence from the diaries of dozens of ordinary Americans suggests that many did not conform. A 19th-century farmer's confession is typical: "Another breach in my Sunday resolve not to work, by killing the hog."

More influential than such agricultural ardor, however, was the growth of cities, where factories never shut down, more festive Sunday behavior arrived with new immigrants, and a rich market for amusement parks, sporting events, and entertainment emerged. In this fast-paced environment, Sunday's symbolic status as a day free of work was enhanced, even as Sunday became a working day for more and more people. Workers had money to spend on their day off--and other workers made money by getting that money from them. This cycle accelerated in the late 20th-century service economy, McCrossen concludes. "Cooking anything is out," a *New York Times* columnist declared in 1996. "On my perfect Sunday, others toil for me."

The American debate over Sunday--articulated in behavior as well as in words--has involved countless parties and positions, many of which McCrossen considers. The Saturday Sabbaths of Jews and Adventists undermined the Christian certainty that Sunday must be equated with Sabbath. Liberal Protestants embraced museums and libraries as agencies of the moral and spiritual uplift they considered Sunday's purpose. Cultural pundits interpreted recreation as a beneficial form of personal renewal, and family togetherness as a worthy (if not necessarily churchy) form of holiness. In the end, Sunday accrued a plethora of meanings within which the sacred and the secular were intermingled, and from which groups and individuals could select what they found satisfying while accommodating the different choices of others.

McCrossen's focus on these landmark shifts makes her book an important contribution to the study of American culture. Her relatively scant attention to religious institutions, however, leaves some intriguing questions unanswered. Since Christian liturgical patterns initially set Sunday apart, it would be interesting to learn more about how these have themselves been affected by the changes McCrossen describes. What has happened to church attendance and the duration of worship services? When and why did many Protestant congregations abandon Sunday evening services and Catholic parishes add Saturday evening mass? Now that leisure has come to define what happens on a day of rest, are contemporary Christians coming to see their own churchgoing as a form of leisure activity, as one choice among many in a service economy?

Even without answers to such questions, McCrossen's fine contribution to the discipline of cultural history is not without lessons for those of us whose interest in Sundays is primarily theological. By demonstrating that contemporary Sundays are

shaped more by "the commercialization of everyday life" than by a triumph of secularization, she adds a crucial insight to the vital conversation about Sunday that continues to this day. If she is right--and I think she is--then Christians who seek the festive and restful experience of Sunday, Lord's Day, Sabbath, must overcome not so much the faceless secularism of mass culture as our own consumerism.