

Reimagining Religion

USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture



Reimagining **Religion**

USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture

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About the Center for Religion and Civic Culture

The idea for the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture (CRCC) started to germinate in 1992, as the conflagrations of the Los Angeles riots were just beginning to subside. A number of civic, corporate and interreligious coalitions were formed to heal the deeply divided city and to address the underlying social problems that had provided tinder for the flames.

CRCC's founders set out to research the role of faith groups in the public square following the uprising. They wrote a report called "Politics of the Spirit," documenting and evaluating the activities of congregations.

The Center for Religion and Civic Culture came out of this research project and report. CRCC was conceived as a way to make creative connections between researchers, policy-makers and religious community leaders, in order to produce new insights into the evolving nature of religion in complex, globalizing societies.

CRCC's capacities and reservoirs of knowledge are thus a distinctive hybrid. Both locally and globally, we have deep networks within a variety of religious, civic and scholarly communities. Our connections enable us to undertake cutting-edge research on new developments in religion. Our understanding of the ways that religious traditions and movements grow and change allows us to help faith groups engage with the wider society. We also help academics, civic organizations, government foundations and businesses engage with faith groups.

In short, CRCC is uniquely positioned to explore how religions change and make change in Southern California and across the globe—and to help religious and civic leaders understand the shifts of the day.

CRCC's work falls into four activities, with research grounding the other three areas:

- **Research.** CRCC explores religious developments locally and globally from an interdisciplinary perspective
- **Training.** CRCC leads capacity-building programs for religious organizations, civic leaders and government agencies
- **Evaluation.** CRCC analyzes and assesses initiatives and programs focused on faith communities
- **Strategic Consulting.** CRCC illuminates trends in religion for foundations, government agencies and organizations to help them shape their strategy and maximize their impact

Since its inception, CRCC has managed more than \$40 million in funding from corporations, foundations and government agencies for research, consulting, evaluation and capacity-building programming. In 2002, CRCC was named a Pew Center of Excellence, one of ten university-based research centers to receive that recognition. CRCC is also involved in the creation of scholarly resources, including the International Mission Photography Archive, the largest online repository of missionary photographs that document social change in non-Western cultures. Today, our staff includes 15 research, programming, communications and administrative professionals, along with contributing scholars, university fellows, student workers and consultants.

CRCC's deep roots in Southern California mean that we remain committed to research in Los Angeles, even as we continue to promote scholarship across disciplinary boundaries, create resources for researchers, policy-makers, communities and thought-leaders, and explore religion's global reach.

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Introduction

Richard Flory
Senior Director of Research
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December 1, 2016

In 2014, the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture (CRCC) was awarded a grant from the John Templeton Foundation to explore the proposition that competition between religious groups stimulates creative innovation, contributing to religious change. Our “Religious Competition and Creative Innovation” project (RCCI) project built on research that CRCC has conducted on religion throughout Southern California as well as on global Pentecostalism—the world’s fastest growing religious movement. But RCCI has focused on multiple religious traditions and encompassed two specific geographic areas: Southern California and Seoul, South Korea.

Throughout the project, we have investigated innovative religious (and irreligious) groups in Los Angeles and Seoul. Our methodological approach has been qualitative rather than quantitative, focusing on case studies of religious organizations and the social contexts in which they operate, in order to gain a better understanding of how religion “works” in the world. Over the three years of the project we have completed more than 70 in-depth case studies and have mapped and collected data on over 500 groups in Greater Los Angeles. In Seoul, we organized a team of six scholars who have been investigating innovative religious groups in six different areas of the Greater Seoul metropolitan area.

We have focused on Los Angeles and Seoul because of their similarities in size and religious diversity, allowing us to compare how religious innovation works in different locations. Further, by focusing on distinct locations, we have been able to learn more about how “place” relates to religious change and innovation.

For example, Los Angeles has a long history of producing innovative religious groups and individuals, such as Aimee Semple McPherson (Angelus Temple), Robert Schuller (Crystal Cathedral), John Wimber (Vineyard), Chuck Smith (Calvary Chapel), Rick Warren (Saddleback Church) and Matthew Barnett (Dream Center).

All of these movements are within the Christian tradition, but Southern California has also been fertile ground for a number of new religious movements, including the Self-Realization Fellowship, Science of Mind (Religious Science) and various branches of Theosophy. L.A. is currently home to thriving and innovative Jewish synagogues, Hindu and Buddhist temples, and a growing number of mosques and Islamic centers. Many groups across all of these traditions and movements have flourished, while others have languished and some have failed after several years of successful operation.

Similarly, the Seoul metropolitan area forms the cultural, commercial, financial, industrial and demographic heart of South Korea. The range of religious groups in the region includes Protestantism, Roman Catholicism and Buddhism as well as New Religious Movements such as Cheondogyo, Korea Soka Gakkai International (KSGI) and Won Buddhism, among others. The Seoul metropolitan area is home to world-famous Christian megachurches such as Yoido Full Gospel Church (YFGC), Kumnan Methodist Church and Onnuri Church. In short, just as in Los Angeles, some congregations across these traditions and movements have thrived, others have diminished and some have failed altogether in the distinctive social and cultural ecology of the Seoul metropolitan area.

This book represents one of the commitments we made with RCCI: to produce a large number of popular articles and blog posts that would serve to bring our research to scholars, practitioners and the general public in a timely and accessible form. This book gathers our output to date (January 2017) from the project, with a couple of additional pieces included that predate the project but were instrumental in our thinking. It includes blog pieces and articles that we have published on the CRCC website (crcc.usc.edu) and in other outlets such as Huffington Post, Religion Dispatches, Christianity Today, Religion & Politics, and many more.

The articles are organized thematically, and within each themed category they are organized by date—from the earliest to the latest. The categories relate to our research questions, but also represent themes that emerged throughout the project. Certainly there are other ways to organize the writing included here, but this represents a good place to start thinking about how religious change and innovation happens, and how it relates to culture, politics, economics and place.

We hope you enjoy what we've gathered here, and that both the examples we use and our interpretations of them spark new ideas about how religion can innovate in the context of social and cultural change, and thus remain vibrant and contribute to the spiritual and communal lives of its members.

Religion,
Innovation,
Change

Competition, Innovation and the Future of Religion

by Richard Flory
March 21, 2014

The primary question that underlies the Religious Competition and Creative Innovation (RCCI) project is whether “religious competition” leads to creative innovation in congregations and other religious organizations.

This question is rooted at least in part in Sir John Templeton’s proposition that competition between religious groups stimulates innovation, contributing to religious change and development. But it is also the main line of inquiry in a significant stream of research in the sociology of religion. The assumption behind this particular mode of investigating religion is that successful religious groups (which generally means those that are largest or growing fastest) offer better religious “products” to “consumers” in the religious marketplace. This interpretive frame then suggests that the most innovative religious groups—those that respond to “changing market forces” most creatively—are the most successful.

Yet this model of how religious movements work leaves unanswered many other questions: How do congregations and similar groups relate to other cultural forces? How do they formulate their missions in changing social landscapes? How do adherents shape the core tenets and practices that determine the ways that the larger group interacts with the rest of the world?

These “problematizing” questions thus prompt us to ask how competition actually works in the thick of community life and how innovation—changes in essential beliefs or practices or the appropriation of new worship styles or organizational strategies, for example—relates to the underlying characteristics of a given movement. In other words, is “being innovative” a goal of a particular congregation, or does innovation happen as a byproduct of the pursuit of its mission?

More broadly, what effects does innovation have—does it strengthen or weaken the sense of meaning and identity that congregation members derive from their participation, or does it simply serve the organization’s need to survive?

What happens when religious groups begin to appropriate the infrastructure of the “innovation industrial complex,” and what is the pipeline of innovation that connects the realms of business and technology to religious organizations? And, finally, is innovation always a good thing for religious movements, or can it lead to bad religious—as well as social and cultural—outcomes?

Admittedly we are at the very beginning of our thinking about these issues, with many more questions remaining to be asked (and, we hope, answered). The answers of course will in large part emerge from our empirical research among congregations in Los Angeles and Seoul.

As we begin to work toward untangling the relationship between religious competition and innovation, and toward understanding the role that innovation plays in the lives of congregations, we have established a regular Monday morning theorizing session, “The Monday Morning Flare,” to think both deeply and broadly (and occasionally crazily) about what we’re observing and to develop compelling narratives to frame our findings. We’ll be posting the most salient discussion points that emerge from our “flaring” as a way to test our ideas publicly and to enlist our network of colleagues and supporters in our efforts.

Our larger goal in this project is to move beyond the well-worn discourse around the factors that contribute to an increase or decrease in a given religious movement’s “market share.” As my colleague (and former grad school mate) Penny Edgell has suggested, we aim to engage in a “decentering” of discussions of the fate of religions in the modern world and instead develop explanations of religious competition, cooperation and creative innovation that more accurately reflect the everyday experiences of individual believers and the congregations or other religious organizations that attract their participation. This strategy reflects ongoing evolution in the academic study of religion that manifests mainly as a shift from a focus on institutions to an

investigation of “lived religion” among adherents of movements that are constantly shaping—and being shaped by—other religious movements as well as other cultural forces. With this in mind, we believe the RCCI project’s close attention to what religious innovation looks like “on the ground” will ultimately produce work that is useful for anyone who wants to understand the future of religion—in L.A., Seoul and beyond. ■



Pirates in the White Room

by Nick Street

September 29, 2014

Last week I met Gary Wexler, who teaches in the communications management program at USC's Annenberg School. The two of us were having lunch with my CRCC colleagues Richard Flory and Brie Loskota.

One of the most intriguing topics that we covered was what Gary called “undulating space”—in essence, a more intentional and carefully tended version of our lively but deliberately casual lunchtime conversation at a bustling but comfortable restaurant. As Gary put it, the two main purposes of this space are to allow for the “synthesizing of disparate” and “turning complexity into simplicity.”

In other words, undulating space allows a new form of order to emerge from a period of contained chaos. We'd touched on a working definition of innovation! The propellers on all of our geek hats spun wildly.

But what does undulating space actually look like? How could we move from this abstract, cruising-altitude description of innovation to a working example on the ground?

Later that afternoon I stopped by Gary's class on “Copywriting and Creativity.” Students in the class were a few chapters into Walter Isaacson's recent biography of Steve Jobs. The day's assignment: Break into groups of three or four and write the 10 most compelling ideas in the chapter on a big piece of butcher paper. These idea rosters were then taped to a wall, and a leader from each team talked for a couple of minutes about one idea that stood out from the rest.

I had fun playing around with the ideas along with the rest of the class, but two seemingly contradictory aspects of Jobs' creative process really caught my attention. The first was his reverence for the romanticized outlawry of pirate culture during the European “Age of Discovery.” (Jobs is often quoted as saying, “It's better to be a pirate than join the Navy.”)

A few minutes later, an intense but earnest young woman said that she was most impressed by the way Jobs configured workspace as a way of facilitating “his pursuit of perfection”—particularly the unadorned, all-white room away from Apple's main campus that served as the creative crucible for Jobs and his inner circle of wizards, ubergeeks and brainiacs.

Fascinating! What does it mean to be a pirate in the white room?

For me, three disparate elements came together during and in the heady hours just after Wexler's class:

- First and most obviously, the compelling metaphor for innovation that sprang from our classroom conversation about Steve Jobs (when I got back to work I began babbling about “pirates in the white room” to my colleagues).
- Up to now, our research team's effort to distinguish innovation from, say, emulation has been a bit like Justice Stewart Potter's remark about what constitutes pornography: We know it when we see it. The piratical metaphor from Wexler's class suddenly gave me a way to talk about what's happening among innovative groups in a much more focused and comparative way.
- Steve Jobs isn't the only disruptive technologist to have a thing for pirates. The contemporary anarchist writer Hakim Bey begins his best-known essay—on what he calls the Temporary Autonomous Zone, or TAZ—with an appreciation for the very sort of pirate utopianism that inspired Jobs. And Bey's writing on the TAZ was one of the key sources of inspiration for the Cacophony Society, which provided energy for the movement that would eventually evolve into Burning Man—a cultural touchstone for many spiritual-but-not-religious “nones.”

With all of this in mind, I realized that many of the “innovative”-tagged groups we’ve been studying might be described as exhibiting TAZ-like characteristics at some point in their recent history. This means that all of these spiritual innovators have, to greater or lesser extents, decoupled themselves from the authority structures of larger institutions and traditions, with the expressed intention of shaping new modes of practicing, ritualizing or organizing spirituality to meet the needs of particular communities.

And, either periodically or in an ongoing way, the key figures guiding each movement engage in a process of creative reimagining that allows for a varying degree of autonomy from the presuppositions that define their communities at any given moment.

In other words, they become pirates in the white room.

While some of these leaders might embrace this perspective on their work—the Rev. Dr. Neil Thomas of Founders MCC, for example, would likely take it as a compliment to be accused of multiple acts of flagrant spiritual piracy—others would almost certainly take offense. The leadership of a couple of genuinely novel yet nonetheless culturally conservative congregations would surely not welcome any association with the thought of someone as controversial as Hakim Bey.

That tension points to an important refinement in the application of the pirates-in-the-white room metaphor. For some innovative groups, the walls of the room form a tighter container, and the anarchic piratical energy is less intense. Holy Spirit Silver Lake regularly experiments with theology and liturgy, but the group’s commitment to its Episcopalian identity sets clear limits on how far members are willing to go with their experimentation.

On the other hand, the movements that have intrigued me most—and that have already begun to stand out as models of innovation for more traditional, less radically autonomous groups—are organized entirely around the deeply moral impulse to serve others. By pledging allegiance to no particular religious authority or identity, these movements are attracting participants from a stunning array of religious traditions, as well as from the rapidly growing ranks of the “nones.”

For these pirates, the walls of the white room are pushed back to encompass the whole world.

That expansive vision with compassion at its heart is, for me, an important marker of religious genius—William James’ term for the experience variously described as transcendence, oneness or the sublime. Now I’m on a quest to find spiritual pirates and the white rooms where they gather. Aaargh! ■

Competitive Religious Philanthropy in the Wake of the Nepali Earthquake

by *Nalika Gajaweera*
May 19, 2015

This post originally appeared at *Religion Dispatches*.

The death toll in Nepal has surpassed 8,500, Reuters reported this week, making it the country's deadliest earthquake on record. In the aftermath of the disaster, aid has come in many forms, although not nearly enough. As Cathleen Falsani reported here in RD, faith groups of all kinds were quick to arrive in the devastated capital.

But do religious groups engage seamlessly in humanitarianism in these contexts?

In the direct aftermath of the quake, for example, the Hindu American Foundation sent out an email encouraging individuals seeking to support relief efforts to channel their donations to Hindu charities in particular.

These organizations, the group claimed, are motivated by a Hindu sense of *seva*, or "selfless service for the benefit of all." Other faith-based groups, in contrast, are "not always selfless," having "ulterior motives, including evangelizing and church-planting," the email argued.

Faith-based giving is widely accepted today as important aspect of the international community's response to emergencies. Less understood, however, is the role that intra- and inter-religious dynamics play in our desires to help. While the impulse to give may be moved by a purity of intention, it is important to understand the ways that religion itself becomes entangled in these places of intervention.

In many parts of South Asia, controversy over religious conversion has intensified in recent decades, particularly as a result of the rise of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity and new forms of evangelism. Christian charitable groups increasingly are viewed with suspicion as carrying proselytizing intentions. The statement by the diaspora-based Hindu American Foundation is grounded in these sub-continental concerns.

In studying Buddhist NGOs doing relief work after the Tsunami and the civil war in Sri Lanka, I found Buddhist groups mobilizing in "competitive philanthropy," as I called it in my dissertation. These groups delivered medical, educational and welfare development programs to the rural poor in predominantly Buddhist areas that they saw as targeted by proselytism.

Similar competitive philanthropic impulses could be said to be shaping the Hindu American Foundation's worldwide humanitarian appeal to aid Nepalese victims. I don't mean to suggest that the impulse to do good here is purely self-serving. Still, this example of competitive philanthropy highlights the power of existing religious tensions and ties to shape religiously inspired humanitarian giving in the wake of a disaster.

These forces influence not only charitable institutions, but also bilateral aid between governments. Take, for instance, the swift response of the government of Sri Lanka to pledge medical aid assistance, military personnel and engineers to Nepal. Although Sri Lanka is most often on the receiving end of international humanitarian assistance, it stepped up to be one of the first three countries to send relief to Nepal, deploying military troops outside of its sovereign territory for the first time in Sri Lanka's history.

The gesture could easily be chalked up to a diplomatic gesture from one small South Asian nation to another, but the humanitarian gesture is rooted in the long-running transcultural exchange between Sri Lanka and Nepal as major historical sites of Buddhism.

"It is indeed our duty to help Nepal in this crisis," a prominent Buddhist clergyman said. "It is a Hindu state with a considerable number of Buddhists living there. It is the place where the Bodhisattva Siddhartha was born."

The Sri Lankan prime minister reiterated those sentiments when he spoke to his parliament after the disaster. Because Sri Lanka is the center of the Theravada Buddhism, he said, it is

the country’s responsibility to aid the birthplace of the Buddha.

During the early 20th century, Sri Lankan Buddhist reformers advocated for establishing Bodhigaya in India and Lumbini in Nepal as the Buddhist holy lands. As the birthplace of Gautama Buddha, Lumbini draws millions of pilgrims from around the world. Although none of the major holy sites in Lumbini were affected by the disaster, Sri Lanka’s generosity to Nepal could be understood as a means for Sri Lankan Buddhists

to reasserts their own identity as the custodians and caregivers of the imagined Theravada Buddhist community.

Religious communities have had a long history of responding to people in need and in a world of catastrophe, both man-made and natural, they play a critical role. Still, even the purest faith-inspired impulse to give cannot escape the religious dynamics of the landscape in which they intervene. ■



Experience,
Embodiment

Churched Out

by Richard Flory
September 29, 2014

I'm churched out. I've gone to more church services in the last two months than I have over the past 30 years. Now, I'm not exactly complaining about this development since these have been, almost without exception, great experiences. It's wonderful to meet and talk with people I would otherwise never come to know.

The services I've attended have varied significantly. I've been to some mainline Protestant services that look and sound evangelical, and to others that feature experimental, stripped-down liturgies; to LGBT congregations that also have "straight" members; to congregations that are intentionally diverse both ethnically and economically and that are committed to being a positive and hopeful presence in their communities. Services have been held in art galleries, theaters, on street corners and in actual church buildings. In every instance both members and leadership have greeted me warmly, even though they often have no idea who I am or why I might be there.

I've written elsewhere that while there are many reasons people go to church, only one of those reasons has to do with "religion" per se. In my case, I've been visiting and participating in many different services as part of my work, but that hasn't kept me from being drawn into the worship experience and community feeling of each of these congregations.

What has struck me most about these services is that in almost every instance, at some point I have been emotionally drawn into what was going on, whether by the music or some portion of the liturgy, or just by the way the members of the worshipping community interact with each other and with me.

For example, on my first visit to Founders Metropolitan Community Church, the weekly communion celebration really showed me who the members of that Christian community are and how they care for each other. At Founders, pastors and lay leaders distribute the usual Eucharistic elements to those who walk to the

altar receive them. But what really got to me was the way that the pastors and lay leaders embraced each individual as he or she approached, and the extended time of prayer offered for each person while they were enveloped in the post-Eucharist embrace. There was no sense of urgency to finish the ritual in order to get to the next person; rather, this was a time of deeply human (and perhaps transcendent) contact for each person.

I've observed similar moments at other churches, illustrating to me the importance that these congregations place on tangible demonstrations of their care, concern and support for each other.

Similarly, the way that music is utilized in these churches is an important part of the worship atmosphere. In my case, music almost invariably produces an emotional response (yes, I tend to tear up during certain combinations of lyrics and melody). Yet I was surprised at one church when I saw that the old pipe organ wasn't just being used to evoke nostalgic "churchiness" but was actually being played by a real organist! This was, in a strange way, very emotional for me. It brought back memories of growing up in churches where my mother was the organist. As a young child, I often sat at her feet while she played during the service.

Most recently I attended a baptism service at one of the city's newest churches, Hillsong L.A. Hillsong meets at the Belasco Theater in downtown, and if Hillsong is anything (and I believe it is much more than this) it is an impressively polished performance involving worship, music and preaching, with upwards of 1,000 mostly younger people in attendance at each service.

The baptisms took place after the 11:00am Sunday service in the parking lot adjacent to the theater, and included two gourmet food trucks, places for people to talk, a stage and a worship band—along with an above-ground pool in which several dozen people were baptized. It all unfolded in the shadow of the Los Angeles

skyline, with lots of family and friends cheering on each person and the occasional homeless person walking through the crowd and asking for “a little help.” To see the sheer joy on the faces of individuals as they came up out of the water, and to hear the hoots and hollers of support from their family and friends, was a very touching experience.

Of course these moments could easily be dismissed as so much nostalgia about my childhood, simpler times or whatever. But I think there is something else going on that helps explain my involuntary reactions to this range of church experiences. We are cumulative beings; that is, we are not only who we are in a particular moment, but the accumulation of different experiences, relationships, associations and the like, all of which work together to make us who we are.

I’ll hasten to add that I’m no psychologist, so I will refrain from any further attempts to explain human consciousness. But my point is that in each of these experiences—and in similar experiences in other religious traditions—there is some amalgam of memory and desire that often resonates with the ritual environment to produce a deep emotional and somatic response. This has certainly been the case in my visits to these different churches.

In my view, consistently successful congregations are those that are able to provide just this sort of emotional and somatic resonance, something that I think we all crave. Creating this spiritual alchemy takes creativity, skillful communication and a willingness to take some measure of risk—the essential ingredients of innovation. It’s important to note that these moments of authenticity can’t be produced through contrivance or manipulation. Like its counterpart in other realms, true spiritual innovation can’t be faked. You know it when you see it. ■

“Creating spiritual alchemy takes creativity, skillful communication and a willingness to take some measure of risk—the essential ingredients of innovation.”

Good Vibrations: Sonic Rituals and Sacred Time

by Nalika Gajaweera

October 6, 2014

“Please come on Saturday morning, by 6:50am to get settled in for the 7-8:30am gathering.” So read the email from Kathryn, one of my research interlocutors, who helps coordinate a small group of Buddhist meditators meeting at a yoga studio in the Silver Lake neighborhood of Los Angeles. My alarm clock rings at 6am, and in minutes I’m dressed and out the door, making the 30-mile drive from Long Beach to the Griffith Park exit off the I-5—a typical commute for Angelenos. Though it’s early Saturday morning the freeways are already busy with commuters making their way across the sprawling metropolis.

At the yoga studio, I find Kathryn and other members already gathered. They are seated cross-legged and perched atop soft meditation cushions and yoga mats lain on the smooth wooden floor. As I greet Kathryn and the other members of the *sangha* (the term for “community” in Sanskrit), I find my own seat in the circle of cushions. I sense stillness in the room that contrasts starkly with the hustle and bustle of the outside world.

Promptly at 7am, once everyone has settled in, Kathryn addresses the group, explaining the general structure of this “sitting”: 30 minutes of seated meditation, followed by a few minutes of walking meditation. The morning’s schedule will conclude with a Dhamma discussion and the voluntary sharing of the meditative experiences. As the designated “bell-master” of today’s gathering, Kathryn proceeds to do what in the Plum Village Buddhist tradition is called, “inviting the bell.” She reaches for the small bronze “singing bowl” placed beside her and rests the bowl in the palm of one hand. With her other hand she grasps a small felt-tipped wooden mallet that accompanies the bowl. A light touch of the mallet against the rim of the bowl produces a short, muffled sound. After gently “awakening” the bell in this way, Kathryn sounds the bell again, this time more firmly; this creates a louder, fuller sound that resonates across the room for a few moments.

Though this practice of “inviting the bell” is specific to the Plum Village tradition that these meditators follow, the ritual of ringing a bell, gong or Tibetan bowl, as it is sometimes called, has been widely practiced in an array of meditation traditions, from Vipassana to yoga. The auditory signals it produces mark both the beginning and end of the period of meditation—a time when meditators turn their attention inward to the somatic awareness of their own breathing and away from the clamorous demands of modern life.

It is an ancient ritual that is increasingly used by modern-day meditation practitioners to bookend an interval of time that is identified as sacred—a period that is qualitatively different from other times of the day spent at home or at work. In other words, the bell is the centerpiece of a ritual that serves to encapsulate sacred time.

As Madeline, a lawyer and a Buddhist meditator, put it to me, “When I sound the gong, I declare that this is my sacred space. This is now my sacred moment that I take to commune, to acknowledge that I woke up. And at the end, when I sound the gong again, I set an intention to go forth with my day with an enlightened heart.” Madeline’s comments reflect how the sacred time ritual is not something she sees as separate from ordinary life. Instead, it helps her to set an aspiration for how she will navigate and negotiate the remainder of her day.

The proliferation of smartphone apps (see for example, [here](#) and [here](#)) designed to emulate the sound of Tibetan singing bowls is indicative of a growing desire among users of these apps to claim time in their busy day for spirituality. It also points toward a culturally savvy digital industry that is keen to capitalize on this demand. Indeed, this digitizing of the ritual has enabled individuals to carve out sacred time potentially anywhere and anytime—not just during a group meditation in a serene Silver Lake yoga studio.

But is achieving the bliss of sacred time as easy as installing an app on your phone?

Commercialization produces conveniences, but are we losing something in the process? It's clear that rituals like bell ringing also create spiritual community—something that apps marketed to individuals arguably work against.

Indeed, my encounters with various groups of meditation practitioners in Los Angeles have shown that one of the most significant reasons for individuals to come together to meditate is to share a sense of community. And, like music being played in church, the ritual of sounding a bell deepens interpersonal bonds. Put another way: The experience of listening collectively to the resonance of a bell can create *sangha* in a way that is, as Richard Flory has recently put it, (see “Churched Out”) both somatic and emotional.

So, if these apps are to be seen as innovations—and perhaps they are—they also raise questions about the qualitative nature of innovation. Maybe some innovations are handy, even cool, but do they also cause us to lose the magic and enchantment that comes with a spiritual practice? ■

“One of the most significant reasons for individuals to come together to meditate is to share a sense of community. And, like music being played in church, the ritual of sounding a bell deepens interpersonal bonds.”

Finding, Losing Faith in Foxholes

by *Andrew Johnson*
October 6, 2014

The aphorism “There are no atheists in foxholes” first arose to describe the pleas for salvation prayed by terrified soldiers facing impending death in the trenches of Europe during WWI.

A century after the Great War, the adage is most often evoked to describe religious commitments made by people who are facing a life crisis that has no earthly solution. Both theists and non-theists are dubious about “foxhole faith,” or religious commitments made in the context of intense personal crisis. The Freedom from Religion Foundation awards an annual “Atheist in the Foxhole Award” to a member of the military who honorably serves their country while maintaining a secular worldview. And in the published notes on a sermon titled “Foxhole Religion,” a pastor in Nebraska stated that “foxhole religion is worthless.” In the sermon notes, the pastor provides what he thinks is the likely three-step trajectory of a people adhering to a foxhole faith:

1. They get into trouble.
2. They forget what they promised.
3. They get into trouble again and they find their religion is worthless.

This is the problem with aphorisms. They try to paint a world full of color and shades of gray using only black and white. In my previous research on religion inside of prison, I spoke with dozens of ex-inmates who found faith in the foxhole’s modern day equivalent, prison, by praying a version of the following prayer: “Lord, if you get me out of this mess, I will follow you.” Many of the men I interviewed had been faithfully living out their religious commitments for two, five and ten years after their jailhouse conversion, and their lives serve as arguments against the conclusions made by the pastor from Nebraska.

Over the last month, the RCCI research team has been visiting a wide range of religious communities in Los Angeles and interviewing members, many of whom have made religious commitments while sitting in their own “foxholes.”

An example is “Steve,” who told me about going to the grocery store to make one final purchase. He arrived at the store, found what he needed and handed it to the clerk. After tax, he owed just over three dollars, so he reached into his pocket and gave the clerk his last six dollars. He waived off the receipt and placed the two dollars and change on the counter—he didn’t need it anymore.

Earlier that afternoon, Steve woke up sober for the first time in years and decided he’d had enough. After trying to quit drinking for years, he concluded that he could never quit. So quitting was no longer an option, but neither was continuing to live on the streets, drinking and hopeless. He saw only one viable solution to his problem, so he walked to the store and bought razor blades.

Steve had spent the previous night sleeping in the bushes next to a church and walked back to that spot with the razors in the pocket where his last six dollars had been. Steve sat against the church wall, opened the package and pulled out a single razor blade. He held it to his wrist, but as the corner of the razor pierced his skin, he stopped. He couldn’t do this sober and he promised himself years ago that he would not die drunk, so he was stuck. Steve told me that at that point he was hit by a wave of fatigue and slept next to the church for the next 16 hours. When he woke up, he tossed the blades into the bushes and got a hot meal from church’s feeding program. At a loss for options, he asked one of the volunteers about the church’s recovery program, which he had heard about while he was living on Skid Row. One bed was open.

I spoke to Steve two weeks after he checked into the recovery program and he was doing a lot better. He showed me the small scar on his wrist

and shook his head, shocked at how close he came to ending his life. Steve had been a staunch atheist, but he told me that now he would now consider himself an agnostic. He was unable to explain the series of events that led him to the church's recovery program, giving him back his life.

"Maybe if there is a God who knows me well, the best way I can learn is for him to say, 'Okay, you are on your own for the next couple of years and we will see how that works for you.' And it hasn't worked at all. Coincidentally, I come here and I don't feel like that piece of trash, that monster I had become, so there might be something to that. I plan on staying here for a minute so maybe it will turn into something else. I am trying not to be cynical and shut the door on anything."

Not everyone facing a life-and-death situation turns to the supernatural for help. Last week, the research team at CRCC spoke to Bart Campolo, USC's newly appointed Humanist Chaplain. He explained how a near-fatal bicycle accident prompted him finally to walk away from a Christian faith that he had held since high school. Though he was a nationally recognized evangelical leader, he said that the lingering doubt that had been growing for years came to a head after his accident. While he was struggling to survive and recover from his injuries, Bart decided not to reach out to God, but let go of the idea of God altogether. His new mission as USC's Humanist Chaplain is to support, guide and encourage students with a similar, secular outlook on the world and to become a leader to the fastest growing religious identity in the United States, the "religious nones."

As we interview members of various religious and non-religious groups and congregations, it is becoming clear that many people do not make religious commitments simply by assessing the theological and scientific tenets of a belief system. People's lived experiences serve as

powerful lenses they use to interpret the world around them. One of the challenges as researchers in the RCCI project will be to reconcile the highly personal, scientifically dubious, yet very powerful personal testimonies of interviewees and with the broader trends and innovations that are shaping religious life in Southern California.

Even if the religious outlook of people who find themselves in foxholes of various sorts has become more diverse, the crucible of personal crisis remains a site of spiritual reckoning. ■

Outsiders as Insiders: How Student Researchers Joined a Jewish Wedding

by Asher Levy and Jonathan Kaye
August 13, 2015

The North Hollywood Orthodox Jewish community is a substantial, thriving community with kosher markets and restaurants, synagogues, schools and all of the accouterments of observant Jewish life. This summer, we've been part of a team of interns at CRCC mapping religious congregations in various parts of Los Angeles. For the Valley portion of the mapping project, we chose to explore this Jewish neighborhood because we grew up in it and have a working knowledge of Hebrew, Jewish liturgy and religious customs.

Most importantly, as Jewish day-school graduates who have made the transition into academic research, we wanted to investigate the insider/outsider dichotomy inherent in the study of religion. We had already experienced being outsiders mapping congregations around the cities, and wanted to attempt the same research in a more familiar setting, to get a better sense for the differences between the study of one's roots and the study of other communities.

Bais Midrash Toras Hashem is a vital center of Jewish life and learning in the North Hollywood Orthodox community, offering ample opportunities for learning, prayer and celebration. It was here where we had our most fascinating, memorable mapping experience, our participation in which straddled the boundaries of insider and outsider.

When Asher entered the building (while Jonathan was parking), the outgoing and gregarious Rabbi Zvi Bloch greeted him enthusiastically, asking him if he was Jewish. Bloch, who has led the synagogue for 33 years, is known for his enthusiastic Jewish outreach, as well as his work with converts to Judaism.

When Asher answered in the affirmative, Bloch asked him if he was really Jewish. At that point Asher knew something was up, and that his services as a member of the tribe would be required in some form or another.

Bloch then asked if he had a half hour; he had a dilemma, which Asher could help solve. A couple, about to be married in a small ceremony at the synagogue, lacked the minyan, or ritual prayer quorum of ten Jewish men (or men or women in liberal Judaism), necessary for the ceremony to be legally binding in the eyes of Jewish law. Would Asher, Bloch inquired, be able to make the minyan so that the wedding could commence? Asher responded that he could do him one better: Jonathan was coming in shortly and he was Jewish too.

"Perfect!" Bloch gleefully responded. "We have a minyan!"

We joined the rest of the minyan at a long table in the main prayer and study space of the synagogue. Cookies and schnapps were present on the table, as was the ketubah, the Jewish marriage contract. We soon learned that the bride-to-be had finished her conversion to Judaism days before; the rabbinical court of three rabbis that had presided over her conversion were present, including Rabbi David Adatto, a family friend of Asher's and the leader of Sha'arei Yerushalayim Congregation, a synagogue located across the street from Bais Midrash, where Asher had spent many a Shabbat with his family.

Once seated around the table, we told Adatto that we were there doing research for the mapping project. Upon hearing this, he expressed enthusiasm for the project and was intrigued by how his congregation could benefit from the community services that the mapping project brings to light. This was the first time during our work for CRCC that a religious leader inquired about how they could benefit from the research. We had encountered negativity and indifference in the past, but never outright enthusiasm, which was refreshing, as was the first-hand knowledge that our work can benefit the communities that we visit.

The groom, dressed in a kittle, a white Jewish shroud-like robe worn on auspicious occasions, entered the room; he was followed by

his surprisingly blank-faced, stoic bride-to-be, who was dressed in a boxy, frilly, pink suit.

During the exchange of rings, Rabbi Bloch asked the groom if he was prepared to enter into the bonds of matrimony in the sacred tradition of Moses and the people of Israel; he said he was. Bloch asked the bride if she was prepared to enter into the covenant of marriage with her groom; she answered, in a gravely serious voice, "If he remains a pious, righteous and upright man of the Lord." The rabbis were taken aback by the severe piety of her answer, as were we!

Next, as the formal ceremony commenced, we were given the honor of holding up the chuppah over the couple and Bloch. The chuppah is a ceremonial wedding canopy, in this case made of a tallit, the fringed shawl worn during Jewish prayer, suspended by four poles, symbolizing the home that the couple will build together, as well as the presence of God.

It was a humbling experience to make possible, let alone participate in, one of the most important milestones in the lives of two individuals, as well as to bear witness to one of the most sacred, intimate and holy Jewish rituals.

After the ritual breaking of a glass, which symbolizes the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem as well as the brokenness of the world, we joined the community in frailech simcha song and hora dance around the surprisingly stoic, freshly converted bride. We then proceeded to the social hall, along with the rest of our motley minyan, for a nosh of pickled herring (a specialty in the world of yeshivas, institutions of Jewish learning with a particular emphasis on Talmud and legal texts), shots of schnapps, and bagels with shmear and lox. It was a casual and pleasant reception, one in which we were happy to take part.

A young yeshiva student sitting across from us, who had also been roped in to complete the minyan, exhibited tremendouschutzpah as he loudly answered his phone during the reception: "I'm here at the convert bride's wedding. There's some nosh, it's ehhhh, not bad." While shouting into his cellphone, this chutzpadik shnorrer (nervy freeloader) then sliced himself a fat slab of the "convert bride's" personal challah and thickly shmear it with a generous mound of cream cheese. If the bride cared, she didn't show it.

The bride's stoicism was in keeping with the legalistic mood of the day; despite the dancing and smoked fish, it was clear that the purpose of the wedding was to validate the couple's previously secular union in the eyes of Jewish law following the bride's conversion.

If she was mostly unmoved, we, on the other hand, were caught up in the wonder of the experience; walking into a house of worship with the intention of conducting research from an outsider perspective, we were swept up in the life of the community and afforded intimate, insider privilege at this momentous occasion. ■

The Boxer's Prayer

by Andrew Johnson
February 3, 2016

**This post originally appeared on
Huffington Post Religion.**

Many professional athletes pray before they compete, but boxers' prayers are special. On a recent Saturday night, Artur Szpilka was carried from the ring inside Brooklyn's Barclays Center on a stretcher after a brutal right from Heavyweight Champion Deontay Wilder rendered him unconscious. I watched the fight and when I saw the punch land, I thought Szpilka was dead.

Szpilka recovered from the blow and wants to fight again, but Prichard Colon, a welterweight from Puerto Rico, currently lies comatose in a hospital bed as a result of his October 17th fight in Fairfax, Virginia. The Twitter handle #PrayForPrichard provides updates on the fighter's condition. Boxers put their lives on the line in every time the bell rings.

The perils of his chosen profession are not lost on Robert "The Ghost" Guerrero. "This is a sport where anything can happen," the former world champion said. "One punch could change your whole life. It brings you closer to God."

In the lead up to his fight with Philadelphia's Danny Garcia, I asked the "The Ghost" about his faith and the content of his prefight prayers.

"I pray that God puts a hedge of protection over the whole ring—myself, the other fighters, all of the participants fighting that night," he said. "It is dangerous; one punch can change everything.... But when it is over you want to see your opponent walk away and be able to spend time with his family."

Guerrero also prays for supernatural support during the fight, "I always pray that God gives me wisdom in the ring, to keep my eyes sharp, my hands sharp, my legs sharp and my reactions sharp."

The boxer's prayer asks God for both protection and violence.

Prayer has been an integral part of Guerrero's six-week training camp in preparation for the main event at the Staples Center in Los Angeles. "Throughout my training camp and throughout my day, I talk to Jesus. I pray to stay grounded and to stay as humble as possible."

Robert's manager, Bob Santos, believes that his fighter's spiritual life is integral to his success in the ring. "If you are not right spiritually, nothing else matters. His body can be in the greatest shape of his life, but if he not there spiritually and mentally, none of that matters."

Can you punch someone in the face for Jesus? It depends who you ask. On the surface there seems to be an inherent conflict between the biblical command to turn the other cheek and the violence that boxing demands. Guerrero is content to let the theologians debate the question because he is at peace with being a Christian fighter. He told me emphatically after his Wednesday workout at City of Angels Boxing Gym, "I fight for the Lord."

In fact, Guerrero sees the upcoming bout as a platform to share his faith. He believes God has put him on an international stage to "inspire others and plant that seed in peoples lives." When he enters the ring, he will have Acts 2:38 sewn onto his trunks. It is his way of letting God speak through him. The New Testament verse reads, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Boxing fans in general organize around tribal affiliations. In their eyes, the fighters are not just skilled athletes, they are the fighting pride of their country, race, ethnicity or hometown. Guerrero's upcoming battle with Garcia has provoked an especially emotional response from boxing fans because it is the latest chapter in the decades old rivalry between Puerto Rico and Mexico. This is boxing's version of Yankees versus Red Sox, Lakers versus Celtics or Vikings versus Packers. Guerrero is of Mexican heritage and Garcia is a Puerto Rican-American and both

countries' flags will be waving in the stands on Saturday night.

When Guerrero was asked if he was excited about fighting in Los Angeles, he responded, "Oh, most definitely. That is where most of my Mexican fans are, all those Latinos out there, all those—I like to call them Chicanos out there—because that's what we are."

Christian and Chicano fans inside the Staples Center and watching on television rooted for Robert Guerrero because of who he is. He is a member of their tribe and they cheer as if he was fighting for them.

But at its essence, boxing is the most individual of sports.

The fans will not have to dodge or throw any punches, their eyes will not swell shut as the fight progresses and they will not taste blood in their mouths or wipe it from their eyes. Fans will not have to rise from their corner's stool every three minutes to face what may be a life-changing round of boxing. The futures of the fans' families are not on the line.

Robert "The Ghost" Guerrero fights. But before he enters the ring, he will pray the boxer's prayer and ask God for both protection and violence. ■

"Can you punch someone in the face for Jesus? It depends who you ask. On the surface there seems to be an inherent conflict between the biblical command to turn the other cheek and the violence that boxing demands."

Pre-Fight and Post-Fight Prayers

by Andrew Johnson
April 30, 2016

**This post originally appeared on
Huffington Post.**

Last November Andre Berto made an unannounced trip to Inova Fairfax Hospital. He went to visit both a comatose Prichard Colón and a family pleading with God to wake up their son. Colón collapsed from a brain injury on October 17, 2015 immediately following a welterweight bout versus Terrell Williams. He remains in a coma. “I went to the hospital,” Berto told me in a phone interview, “to show my support and pray with the family.”

When I asked about the content of his post-fight prayers with the Colón family, he responded, “I prayed that the Lord would bring healing to Prichard, strength to the family and to cover the situation in the blood of Jesus.”

The content of boxers’ pre-fight and post-fight prayers can be very different from each other. Many fighters’ ask God for both protection and violence before they enter the ring, whereas their post-fight prayers may give thanks or plead for healing. Berto’s prayer in Colón’s hospital room is an example of the latter.

When I spoke with Berto, he was in pre-fight mode preparing for a rematch with “Vicious” Victor Ortiz.

Berto faced Ortiz for the first time in 2011 in a furious fight that changed the trajectory of his career. He entered the fight undefeated and a heavy favorite against a skilled, but wildly unpredictable Victor Ortiz. Each boxer knocked the other to the canvas in the early rounds, but the fight hit its violent crescendo in the sixth when Berto flattened Ortiz with a right hand. As the referee counted, both Ortiz and the crowd rose to their feet. Ortiz got up to keep fighting, but the fans stood anticipating Berto would finish the fight with a knockout. Ortiz absorbed the next wave of punches, waited for an opening, then landed a pair of left hooks on Berto’s chin that folded the fighter into a motionless heap in the center of the ring.

The crowd lost their collective senses, erupting into an uncontrolled frenzy. Berto crawled to his feet, beat the count and finished the fight, but the damage was done and he lost a unanimous decision to “Vicious” Victor.

The fight was great for the fans, but not for Berto. I asked how he felt after the loss, “It was devastating” he said, “I closed myself in and I just stayed in the house.” His situation worsened when he lost two of his next three fights and then hit bottom after he tore a tendon in his shoulder during a 2013 fight against Jesus Soto Karass.

The surgery and rehabilitation required to repair Berto’s shoulder left him physically and emotionally wounded. Unsure if he would ever fight again the boxer faced an unfamiliar foe, depression. His family stuck close, but his managers and promotional team vanished, focusing their attention on younger, more profitable fighters. Along with the support of his family, Berto credits the friendship, support and prayers of fellow fighter, Andre Ward, to help him navigate what he referred to as “dark days” and inspire a return to the ring.

“Me and my boy Andre Ward,” said Berto thinking back to 2013, “we sat down and talked and prayed together. I literally remember the words of our conversations...I really felt the spirit (of God) during that time.” The post-fight prayers the two boxers prayed together kept Berto “sane” during his recovery and emotional struggle. They helped reignite both his faith in God and his career in boxing.

Berto trained with Andre Ward at his gym near Oakland to get ready for the rematch against Ortiz. Some of Ward’s influence will be on display in Berto’s boxing on Saturday night, but another aspect of his impact has already materialized. Just like Ward showed up to support Berto when he was hurt and in need of a praying friend, Berto has visited Prichard Colón twice and says he will keep praying until his colleague emerges from the coma.

Examining pre-fight/post-fight prayers and the religious practices of boxers does not

culminate in a neat, cohesive theology. In fact, one could argue that more boxers should direct their prayers towards asking God the following question, “Should we be fighting each other for money?”

Instead of producing a “theology of boxing” the religious lives of fighters serve as examples of how people live out their faith in an uncertain, unpredictable world where not everything makes sense. As theologian Greg Boyd argues in his book *Is God to Blame?*, “We pray as we live: in a sea of ambiguity.”

Many boxers practice their faith in churning, choppy theological waters and pray in the midst of ambiguity, triumph and tragedy. Boxers may participate in a unique profession, but all of us who pray have our own versions of pre-fight and post-fight prayers. ■

“Examining pre-fight/post-fight prayers and the religious practices of boxers does not culminate in a neat, cohesive theology.”

Faith in East Los Angeles, the Vatican of Boxing

by *Andrew Johnson*
May 27, 2016

**This post originally appeared on
Huffington Post.**

Leo Santa Cruz is the undefeated, undisputed champion of America's best boxing city, Los Angeles. He won that title after defeating Abner Mares, a fellow Angeleno, at the Staples Center last August. But boxing has never been just a sport to Santa Cruz, it has always been a means to an end.

As a kid, Leo's dad Jose, worked as day laborer in and around Compton. When Jose could find steady work washing dishes, painting houses and mowing lawns, he paid the rent for the family's one-bedroom apartment and the food that went on the table. When the work was hard to find, so was money for rent and food.

I sat down to talk with Leo Santa Cruz at his gym earlier this year. When we talked about his childhood, he remembered two things about living in Compton: food and fear. There was too much of one and not enough of the other.

"It was hard growing up," Leo told me. "We used to live right there in Compton. When I was small there were a lot of shootings and a lot of gangs. I remember not having enough to eat and praying that my trainer would bring us something to eat."

Jose saw that his family was scared and suffering, and he was skeptical that his line of work offered a solution for their problems. As head of the household, he made a high-risk/high-reward wager that would change the trajectory of the Santa Cruz family. He began training his four sons as boxers and told them, "One of you will be world champion."

The oldest didn't take to the sweet science, but under their father's tutelage, Robert, Jose Armando and Leo, the youngest son, showed promise in the ring. Lupus ended his brother Robert's career (and almost his life), and swelling in the brain derailed Jose Armando's shot at a championship.

Jose Armando's boxing-related brain injury was the risk side of his father's wager. Leo's career would be the reward.

With his brothers on the sidelines, Leo trained and fought with the weight of his family's future on his shoulders.

"I wanted to fight for the future of my family," Santa Cruz said. "I thought, 'I am going to work hard for this and sacrifice and hopefully it will pay off.' Thankfully it did. We live in a big house now. We each have our own room, and we always have enough to eat, so I can't complain."

The family's journey took them from Compton to an apartment on the east side of Monterrey Park and eventually to a house in Lincoln Heights, East Los Angeles. Their destination was appropriate, said Andrew Rodriguez, a life-long friend and Leo's executive assistant who had a front-row seat to struggles and victories of what is now the first family of L.A. boxing. "East Los Angeles is always going to be home to boxers. You could say that it the mecca of boxing."

Maybe East L.A. should be called the "Vatican of boxing" because of the neighborhood's historic and visible Catholic identity.

The Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico, is the star of East L.A.'s street art. Images of the saint color the neighborhood and turn profane streetscapes into something sacred.

Her brown skin and merciful eyes look over Los Angeles' east side from countless street corners, freeway sound barriers and hanging from the necks' of its boxers.

“To us and the boxing community, the Virgin is where you go to draw strength,” Rodriguez said. “You see it all over East Los Angeles, you always see it. It is embedded in our minds, it is embedded in our hearts.”

Leo Santa Cruz, a Catholic himself, entered the ring for the fight against Mares with a gold medallion of the saint dangling over his shoulders, but he no longer asks the Virgin of Guadalupe to intercede in order to put food on his family’s table or to provide a better place to live. Those pleas have been answered.

Now Santa Cruz asks her to help him build his legacy and help him become one of the greatest fighters to come out of the City of Angels (and saints). ■



TOP LEFT: RAYMOND RODRIGUEZ; TOP RIGHT: ROBERT GUERRERO; LOWER RIGHT: MIKEY WILLIAMS

Manny Pacquiao, Championship Boxer, Has a New Opponent: Philippine Poverty

by *Andrew Johnson*
June 23, 2016

This article originally appeared in
Christianity Today

A political candidate was recently elected who is a bigger celebrity than Donald Trump, talks more about his personal relationship with God than Ted Cruz, and understands poverty more intimately than Bernie Sanders. As the winner of world titles in eight different weight classes, the candidate is also considered by many fans and fighting experts alike to be the most dynamic boxer to lace up the gloves since Muhammad Ali.

Manny Pacquiao, who has been a congressman in the Congress of the Philippines since 2010, won a seat in the Filipino Senate on May 9. He retired from boxing this spring shortly after defeating welterweight Timothy Bradley in a 12-round decision in Las Vegas. From street kid to world boxing champion to national hero and global icon, Pacquiao, 37, will continue his unlikely career trajectory by pursuing a new vocation: that of evangelical politician.

From ‘Nothing’ to \$400 Million

A week before his fight with Bradley, I sat and talked to Pacquiao in the basement of Hollywood’s famous Wild Card Boxing Gym as he prepared for a training session with his longtime coach, Freddie Roach.

We talked a bit about his upcoming match, but mostly about his 2012 conversion to Christianity and the way his relatively new faith might shape his career post-boxing. “Now I understand everything,” Pacquiao said about his boxing career and unlikely rise to stardom. “The Lord raised me from nothing into something for a purpose, not for my purpose but for his purpose.”

Pacquiao said he came from “nothing,” but describing his life story as “rags to riches” captures neither the hopelessness of his youth nor the wealth and fame he found through boxing. Pacquiao was born in a village in the southern Philippines and remembers drinking water in the

evening to try to fool his stomach on days his family couldn’t afford rice. But it was more than hunger pangs that pushed him out of his family’s house and onto the streets of General Santos City as a teenager. A difficult relationship with his father came to a painful head when the elder Pacquiao arrived home drunk and angry and proceeded to kill, cook, and eat the family dog. Pacquiao’s father soon abandoned the family. That act left an emotional wound in his son that would not heal for 20 years.

By the time he turned 16, Pacquiao had made the 500-mile boat trip from General Santos City to Manila and was fighting for money. If Pacquiao’s life started with less than rags, through boxing he achieved more than riches. As a teenager, he spent his days punishing heavy bags and his nights sleeping on the gym floor. According to *Forbes*, since his first fight in 1995 (in which he earned less than \$5), Pacquiao has fought 66 times, earning more than \$400 million. He raked in more than \$160 million in 2015 alone. But financial figures only represent part of the “riches” in Pacquiao’s story.

‘Fist of the Nation’

Somewhere during his career he became the living, breathing, fighting symbol of the Filipino people. Pacquiao embodied an entire country’s struggles and triumphs, and served as the public face of the Philippines, a country where nearly 20 percent of the population lives on less than \$1.25 a day. Boxing clichés like “The People’s Champ” were not enough to describe him, so he was dubbed Pambansang Kamao, the “Fist of the Nation.”

Pacquiao’s symbolism extends beyond the shores of the island nation to the 10 million Filipinos living overseas. Cheering for the fighter as he beat the world’s best boxers—including Oscar De La Hoya, Ricky Hatton, Miguel Cotto, and even in his loss to Floyd Mayweather—gave the Filipino diaspora, particularly the 4 million Filipinos living in the United States, a way to be Filipino while living in another country that was previously unavailable.

My interest in Pacquiao's career began over a decade ago through a combination of reverence for the sweet science and my friendship with Filipino American Emmanuel Pimentel. I asked Pimentel, a Christian and higher education counselor living in Virginia, to describe Pacquiao's significance to the Filipino community in the United States. "It doesn't matter if a Filipino has left the Philippines a month ago or over 40 years ago like myself," Pimentel told me. "We miss the specific smells, sounds, personalities, and character traits that make up the Filipino culture. Watching Manny Pacquiao the past 12 years has helped me to connect with a country and people that I left behind."

The fighter embodies his homeland's essence in a way that resonates with Filipino Americans like Pimentel. "It is the way Manny speaks, his accent, the way he smiles and waves to the crowds as he enters the ring that reminds me of the warmth of our island's people and simple joys."

Dream Conversion

The Philippines is the third largest Catholic country in the world behind Brazil and Mexico, with over 85 percent belonging to the Roman Catholic Church. Because Pacquiao means so much to so many, it was big news when he converted from Catholicism to evangelical Christianity. Pacquiao's conversion came at the height of his career but at a low point in his personal life. His drinking, gambling, and womanizing were poorly kept secrets that his fans were eager to overlook, but his transgressions were tearing apart his marriage and family. Though he always identified as religious, a vivid dream in the midst of the turmoil brought him to his knees and prostrated him by the side of his bed. He confessed his sins and committed his life to Jesus. Four years after his conversion, Pacquiao told me, "The best thing that has happened in my life was that I encountered God."

Pacquiao's trainer, Roach, is a self-proclaimed agnostic leaning towards atheism, and has had a front-row seat to the transformation of the man he has coached for 15 years. "Since he became a born-again Christian," Roach said, "he has become a much better person, a better husband and father. He doesn't gamble and he doesn't drink. He completely changed. His wife became the happiest woman I ever met." Roach then grinned and raised his eyes and said, "But it did hurt his boxing career."

Pacquiao hasn't knocked anyone out since he gave his life to God. His trainer, television commentators, and boxing fans bemoan what appears to have been the softening of a killer instinct that previously laid so many opponents on the canvas. But after 15 years together, Roach loves Pacquiao like a son and told me, "I can say that [his conversion] was more good than bad, but for me, the bad is what I do." Laughing at the description of his chosen trade, he added, "I am trying to get him to be a bit more vicious for this fight [against Bradley], a little meaner."

Pacquiao didn't knock out Bradley in their April fight, but he put on a thrilling performance and convinced many observers that he may have a fight or two left in him. On Pacquiao's request, Roach stepped into the ring wearing the Team Pacquiao uniform, a shirt designed with the iconic image of the Filipino flag and the words "Jesus Is the Name of the Lord" written loudly in block letters across the shoulders.

When he was training in Los Angeles, Pacquiao attended the Westside campus of the nondenominational, multisite Shepherd of the Hills Church. Pacquiao's aunt was a member of the church and invited her nephew to join her shortly after his conversion. Lead pastor Dudley Rutherford has not only observed a change in Pacquiao's disposition since they first met in 2012, he has noticed a change in the members of the fighter and politician's entourage. "I have seen the people in his inner circle change," Rutherford told me. "People who were once cold and indifferent to Christianity are starting to read

their Bibles and change their attitudes....It really is miraculous.”

I traveled to Las Vegas two days before Pacquiao’s final match to witness two parallel events, the media machine that promotes a pay-per-view fight in boxing’s most important city, and the three-day evangelism campaign hosted by Pacquiao in his hotel’s conference room. Rutherford flew in from LA to preach at three Bible studies hosted by Pacquiao. Crowds ranged between 600 and 1,000 people, and Pacquiao himself handed out hundreds of the 82,000 Bibles he recently purchased. Open to the public, the Bible studies drew Pacquiao’s friends and family, as well as Vegas-based Filipino Christians and fans who wanted to see their hero up close. Pacquiao welcomed the crowds, introduced Rutherford, and on Saturday morning, implored the people not to “worry about the fight tonight, the Lord will take care of that.” After the fight was over and won, Pacquiao returned to his home in Los Angeles, and, with Rutherford, baptized more than a dozen people in his swimming pool before boarding a plane back to the Philippines.

‘Fist for the Poor’

Boxers’ retirement announcements should always be treated with suspicion, and the 37-year-old might fight again, but his stated focus now is to fulfill his campaign promise to be the “fist for the poor” as a member of the Filipino Senate and to try to be an effective politician while maintaining his integrity.

I asked Pacquiao why his political goals center on alleviating poverty and increasing economic and educational opportunities for the millions of impoverished Filipinos. He responded to the question like he did to nearly all of my questions, by referencing a biblical passage. “Because it is in the Bible,” he said. “Jesus said, ‘I was naked, but you didn’t clothe me. I was hungry, but you didn’t feed me.’ A lot of people

are wealthy and have something they could do for the poor people, but they don’t do it because of the rigidity in their hearts.”

Bishop Efraim Tendero, the secretary general of the World Evangelical Alliance, was born in the Philippines and is enthusiastic about Pacquiao’s political ambitions. He thinks Pacquiao’s “fist for the poor” message resonates with Filipinos because “he is really on the side of the poor.” Tendero told me over the phone from Manila, “He identifies with them because he came from poverty. He remembers where he came from and that when he arrived in Manila he was a nobody. He hardly had food to eat. Now he wants to speak out and stand on the side of the poor.”

Though Tendero believes a successful six-year term in the senate could propel Pacquiao to a future presidential candidacy, he recognizes that boxing and politics require different skill sets. The bishop is concerned that Pacquiao doesn’t have “a strong mentor who could guide him and help him.”

Pacquiao was elected to the Filipino congress in 2010 and is currently midway into his second term as a representative. His career as a congressman has been nothing close to as stellar as his career as a boxer. Training and promotional obligations led to an abysmal attendance record for congressional sessions, and he has switched political parties frequently and struggled to pass legislation of his own. But arguably Congressman Pacquiao’s biggest political misstep did not take place on the floor of the congress. It happened on the set of a television talk show broadcast by Filipino network TV5 this February.

“It’s common sense,” Pacquiao responded when asked about his views on same-sex marriage, which is illegal in the Philippines. “Do you see animals mating with the same sex? Animals are better because they can distinguish male from female. If men mate with men and women mate with women they are worse than animals.”

When the translated footage hit the global press, Pacquiao was shredded by the media and

LGBT rights groups, was banned from a Los Angeles shopping complex, and lost his corporate sponsorship with Nike. But it wasn't simply the media or activists who reacted strongly to the comments. He hurt fans, admirers, and fellow Christians.

As Pimentel told me, "As a Christian and as a fan of Pacquiao, I was disturbed when I read about his comments." The excerpts struck him as "lacking the love and grace that Jesus pours on us." Watching the interview in its entirety softened his initial criticisms. After watching the quotes in context, Pimentel "did not feel that Manny was actually trying to compare homosexuals to animals," but he still believed Pacquiao had made a mistake in his response to the question. Pacquiao has since apologized, and in an attempt to restate his intended message, he posted Old and New Testament verses to social media.

When the topic came up in our conversation, Pacquiao's press advisers tried to stop him from speaking on it, but he waved them off and reiterated that the quotes extracted from his 10-minute interview were taken out of context. He told me that what he really wanted to say was, "Who am I to judge? Who am I to condemn another person? I am also a sinner. I am also a person who sins. What I am condemning is the act."

But there are no "do-overs" in a world where every syllable spoken on a public stage is recorded and can be instantly posted online. Pacquiao is the most visible person in the Philippines and, as Tendero suggested, he may need guidance on how to engage with social issues as both a poli-

tician who serves an entire nation and a committed Christian. One advantage that Pacquiao will have as an evangelical politician in the Philippines is that Protestant Christianity is a minority faith. The Philippines has been a predominantly Catholic country since the archipelago was colonized by the Spanish in the 16th century. Even though the number of evangelical Filipinos has doubled in the past 30 years, they still represent only 10 percent of the country.

Unlike in the United States, where Protestant Christianity is dominant, Filipino Protestants cannot expect to build voting blocs based on religious identity. They must work with others. "Filipino evangelicals have developed many interfaith dialogues in the country, because we are a minority group," said Tendero. "We have tried to interface with other groups on common issues that face the nation, like the issues of climate change, human trafficking, the peace process, poverty alleviation, and disaster response." Tendero said that Filipino evangelicals have been successful in cooperating with politicians of different faith backgrounds and have paved the road for Pacquiao to do the same as he pursues his career as an evangelical politician.

After speaking with Pacquiao, following him during his fight week activities, and talking to the people who interact with him in private moments, it is clear that he is dedicated to using his unique position for the cause of Christ. What is unclear is if national symbols make effective politicians and if regular people make religious commitments as a result of a celebrity's faith. Pacquiao is beginning a new chapter in his life. Now that his fights in the squared circle have come to an end, the challenge he faces as a Christian senator in the Philippines is to be both the "Fist of the Nation" and the "Fist of Christ." ■

The Welterweight Church Usher

by *Andrew Johnson*
June 24, 2016

**This post originally appeared on
Huffington Post.**

Shawn Porter is not the only one skipping meals in preparation for his WBA welterweight title bout this Saturday night at the Barclays Center. In the boxer's adopted hometown of Las Vegas, members of the prayer team at Porter's church, Remnant Ministries, participate in their own version of "fight week" by praying and fasting on behalf of the fighter who's also the usher at their church.

Remnant Ministries' pastor Randall Cunningham isn't impressed by the hype surrounding Porter's fights—he played quarterback in the NFL for 16 years and understands the hype and pressure surrounding professional athletics. As Porter's pastor and mentor, Cunningham sees boxing as what Porter *does*, not who he *is*, and his interest in the twenty-eight-year old challenger does not hinge on the outcome of one fight.

"In church, Shawn is just Shawn," Cunningham said, "but when he is ready to have a boxing match, we say, 'Okay, let's get on our knees and fast and pray for him.'"

Las Vegas is not a city known for piety. Remnant Ministries grew from an informal Bible study group that met in the Cunningham family living room to a megachurch where over 1,200 people come to worship on any given Sunday. Thousands more participate via digital streaming. Cunningham says the church's growth wasn't due to an innovative evangelism strategy or savvy advertising campaign.

"We love people. That's our marketing," he said. "When you come here you are going to learn the Bible, you are going to be loved by people and you are going to worship."

Remnant Ministries and Pastor Cunningham have become important members of Team Porter since Shawn and his father moved to Las Vegas in 2013. The former Eagles, Vikings, Ravens and Cowboys quarterback doesn't give advice on

when or how Porter should throw his jab, but he is nonetheless uniquely equipped to serve as a mentor. Like Porter, he has had to learn how to navigate celebrity, faith and the spiritual challenges that playing a violent sport for a salary inevitably entails.

I spoke with both Porter and Cunningham inside their church in Las Vegas before his fight Keith Thurman to talk about the relationship between pastor and fighter, how the church supports Porter and how the boxer serves his church.

"Pastor Cunningham has done some very unique and unbelievable things for me and has elevated my spirituality as a Christian," Porter said. "I take a lot of knowledge just from watching him and how he carries himself. You need someone who is going to challenge you. As an athlete, as a black man and as a Christian, he has set the bar for me to reach."

People hit and get hit in both boxing and football, and part of what Cunningham talks to the younger Porter about is how to perform at a world-class level in a sport that demands violence without compromising religious commitments.

"There is a thin line that and you can't cross over," Cunningham said, "you have to be able to turn a switch on and you have to know when to turn the switch off. That is how it was for me in football. I had to go out and act a little crazy, but keep my mentality strong, my integrity and my morals at a level where I am representing God."

Cunningham is intentional in the way he talks about Porter's profession and always says "boxing matches" and never "fights" when talking about what Porter does to make a living. Like he said, it's a thin line.

Humility and serving others are central themes in the two men's conversations. As a pastor, Cunningham purposefully downplays his personal successes in the NFL. He recently auctioned off nearly all of his own football memorabilia to raise money for an addition to the church building. He has also made some small, symbolic

gestures to push back against the celebrity culture that has become prevalent in some large Protestant churches in the United States.

When I pulled into Remnant Ministries' parking lot, I rolled into the spot closest to the door, but before I got out of my car, I checked for the "Reserved for Pastor" sign before taking the keys out of the ignition.

"I don't believe in giving people special seats in the church or spaces in the parking lot, no," Cunningham said when I pointed to my car. "If I get here late I can park across the street."

When talking to Porter, Cunningham speaks frankly about some of the mistakes he made while he was one of the most recognizable athletes in the U.S. He doesn't try to hide the fact that even though he is the pastor of a prominent church, there are areas of his life in which he still struggles.

During our conversation, Cunningham pointed to the welterweight sitting next to him and said, "Shawn, I respect him, he is a son in the Lord, but I am going to push him to do what God wants him to do. I see a man who is light years beyond where I was when I was his age. I went through years of pride and craziness before I figured it out. I need to be vulnerable to Shawn because he needs to see the real me."

Most Sunday mornings, Shawn Porter places a name tag on his sport coat and serves as an usher at the church. "I am proud of what I am to my church" said Porter. Depending on how the week's sparring sessions went, he may lead people to their seats with swelling around an eye or cuts on his face from his opponent's gloves. But this is the sort of reciprocal relationship the pastor expects from the church's members. They should both serve and be served by others.

Pastor Cunningham and other church members serve Shawn Porter by praying before and during his fight—or boxing match. They pray

for the safety of both fighters, that Shawn Porter will box the best he can and that God will give the Remnant Ministries usher wisdom in how to use the national stage where he performs. But according to Cunningham, a Saturday night match "is about little brother going out and little brother coming back. When he does come back to church, it brings joy because we all share in the experience. It is not just about him, he doesn't get to have it all by himself, we all get to share in the experience." ■

Andre Ward And The Fight For Consistency

by Andrew Johnson

This post originally appeared on *Huffington Post*.

“Smokin’ Joe”, “Iron Mike”, “PacMan”, “Money”, “Macho Camacho”, “Real Deal”, “Motor City Cobra” ... “The Greatest.” Aspiring boxers should choose their nicknames carefully because if they are successful, their handles could follow them for the rest of their lives.

After winning the 2004 Olympic gold medal as a Light Heavyweight, Andre Ward turned pro. Inspired by a verse in the book of Galatians, he dubbed himself: Andre “Son of God” Ward. The moniker doesn’t roll smoothly off the tongue and is an oddity in boxing because it neither suggests impending violence, nor pays homage to the fighter’s hometown. I asked him why he chose it, “It fits.” Ward answered, “I think it is authentic, it is organic and it really speaks to who I am and what I am about.”

Professional athletes and commentators have increasingly used their visibility and cultural capital to make statements and symbolic gestures on social issues during pre-game rituals, post-game interviews and in the interstitial moments in television broadcasts. In 2014, dozens of professional basketball players wore “I Can’t Breathe” T-shirts to bring attention to the killing of Eric Garner at the hands of the NYPD. NFL camera crews now scan the sidelines during the national anthem to identify players who decide to kneel, sit, or raise a fist during the song. Most recently, NBA sportscaster Ernie Johnson took two minutes during a pre-game show to deliver his personal, faith-based reaction to Donald Trump’s victory in the presidential election. It went viral in hours.

Given Ward’s history of speaking publicly about his faith, I asked what sort of message he planned to send while occupying boxing’s biggest stage. “I don’t have one polarizing message,” he said “it is just about being consistent over the years. Sometimes the biggest statements you can make are by living something out.”

I wanted to know what Ward would say, he told me to watch how he lives.

The consistency he now reveres was fleeting for Ward and his brother growing up in the Bay Area. A crack cocaine addiction pulled the boys’ mother from their home and left Ward’s father, Frank, with a heavy burden. Ward described his father as a loving man who introduced him to both Christianity and boxing.

To a young Andre Ward, his father was Superman, he was invincible and he was his hero. But Frank Ward was susceptible to his own Kryptonite and like the mythical superhero he would disappear behind closed doors, reappearing transformed.

“I watched this pattern with my dad,” Ward told HBO Sports, “He would be normal in the morning. We would go to school, me and my brother, and he would be normal when we would come home. Tired, but normal. He would spend some time with us, then he would go into his room for about an hour and then he would come out a different person.”

Frank Ward was a Christian, a devoted father and a heroin addict. While those identities are not mutually exclusive, they created inconsistencies that bent but did not break Ward’s love for his father. On Saturday night, Andre Ward will enter the ring with the initials F.W. proudly embroidered on his trunks.

Ward does not want any disconnect between his faith, family and fighting career. His actions in the ring have been the epitome of consistency, he hasn’t lost a match since he was a 12-year-old.

Operating with integrity in the business of professional boxing has posed a more formidable challenge to Ward than the fighters he has faced in the ring. Early in his professional career, he left money on the table when he refused to fight at the Playboy mansion in Los Angeles. His decision infuriated managers and promoters, but Ward did not want his name associated with Playboy.

More recently, Ward spent nearly two years away from boxing because he refused to fight under a contract he believed to be deceptive and unjust. To him the layoff was the price consistency demanded. Tangled in litigation, Ward became the target of criticism from the press, television network executives and fans. Last March, boxing writer Jimmy Tobin predicted the fallout from the fighter's contract dispute would never fully disappear.

"Spectators will greet Ward with cries of hatred the night he faces Kovalev; even should he win, and there are many reasons to believe he will, those same cries will dog Ward when the fight is over."

Ward concedes he may have lost some fans who felt he should "know his place" and fight when told. But if he is able to beat the powerful Russian on Saturday night, Ward will be known as the best pound-for-pound boxer in the world.

Ward understands winning fights is important to his legacy. But he argues the success of his boxing career will ultimately be measured by a consistency in character established in the unseen hours of his daily life, not the ephemeral moments captured by the camera.

"I want to be able to look back and say that I stood where I was supposed to stand," said Ward, "I fought where I was supposed to fight, in the ring and out of the ring."

"Ward understands winning fights is important to his legacy. But he argues the success of his boxing career will ultimately be measured by a consistency in character established in the unseen hours of his daily life, not the ephemeral moments captured by the camera."

Doing It All For Her: A Lesbian Muslim Hip-Hop Singer on Art and Activism

by Nick Street
July 21, 2016

**This article originally appeared on
The Huffington Post.**

"I could've been like the dude in Orlando," said Jaheda Choudhury-Potter, a self-described "geeky dark-skinned lesbian Muslim" who fronts a queer hip-hop band in the UK.

Reflecting on the story of Omar Mateen, who murdered 49 people and injured dozens more at a gay dance club in Florida, Choudhury-Potter said, "You sneak around to the point when you explode, killing yourself or a bunch of other people. Orlando is one tiny little story of hundreds of years of abuse of LGBTQI people."

So if you come at her with any sort of bigoted nonsense, don't think that Choudhury-Potter won't call you out. You can be sure that she will. But no need to take things personally—she's mainly concerned about her own mental hygiene.

"I'd rather be an asshole to your face than be polite, go home and scream into my pillow."

In the media coverage that followed the Pulse nightclub shootings, many news consumers are seeing queer Muslims for the first time. That invisibility is largely a consequence of the risks that coming out entails for queer people in any conservative religious tradition. But well before events in Orlando put their community in the spotlight, artists and activists like Choudhury-Potter have been creating spaces where LGBT Muslims can explore their faith and identity more openly.

Choudhury-Potter's band, Ajah UK, is based in Manchester—a town that has spawned successive generations of trailblazing acts, including The Hollies, The Smiths, New Order and Oasis. When she performs, Choudhury-Potter, 40, said she sees herself not just as an artist but also as the leader of an insurrection against the misogyny of the city's male-dominated music scene.

"My name means warrior," she said. "Part of me wants to be Harriet Tubman or Malcolm X."

Ajah UK has won accolades in the local press—Manchester's *Evening News* called the band "a breath of fresh air" in the city's testosterone-heavy hip-hop subculture. But the real coup for Choudhury-Potter is Shit Lesbian Disco, a women-only club night that she and her bandmates launched this spring.

"SLD isn't anti anything," Choudhury-Potter said. "It's about creating a space by women, for women."

What was the payoff for the 700 partiers who attended SLD's inaugural night in April?

"My motivation for the whole thing was about freedom," she said. "We got a night out when we didn't have to think about blokes."

Choudhury-Potter ("Potter" is her wife's family name) grew up in an all-Muslim part of Sheffield when the city was still a blue-collar steel town. During her grade-school years in the 1980s, kids from her neighborhood were bussed to an immigrant-majority school in a white working-class district.

"The bus was escorted by police whenever the National Front [a British far-right party] would come out in force," she said.

Tensions between young white and brown men regularly erupted into fighting. In that cauldron of racial and religious animosity, Choudhury-Potter said she could have easily succumbed to hatred.

"It would have made sense that I would have hated everyone with white skin," she said. "Same as two plus two is four."

She added, "I did for short period of time—I hated. I'm not immune to being a dick."

At 17, Choudhury-Potter left home because she believed her options would be severely limited if she didn't find another way to make a life for herself.

"Bengali Muslim girls are supposed to get married and have babies," she said. "And women are taught to think that the world will fall apart if you break the rules. I wanted to make my own choices. If I had regrets, I wanted those to be mine too."

For several years she hoboed around England and Scotland by stowing away in the luggage compartments of inter-city busses. She lived on the streets in Glasgow, London and Birmingham—wherever a given motor coach would take her.

By the time she was in her 20s, Choudhury-Potter's parents had divorced and her mother had moved to Manchester. Her father died in 2002. Since she was too old "to be sent to the principal's office," Choudhury-Potter decided to reconnect with her family and start putting down some roots.

The first iteration of her career as a performer was in the theater, where she found that she liked experiencing herself creatively by being on stage. But she eventually began to chafe against the formal constraints of the profession as well as the racism that often seemed to shape casting decisions.

"Acting for me was about spitting other people's words," she said. "Plus I was always cast as the receptionist or the slut. I couldn't play Alice in Wonderland."

She and her Ajah UK band-mates stepped into a rehearsal space together for the first time in January 2014. The following June, they were headliners at the World Pride event in Toronto. Since then they've gigged steadily at women's festivals and LGBT events in Britain and the rest of Europe.

"We are always in front of women," Choudhury-Potter said. "My main focus is *she*—she's my audience, it's for her entertainment that I do what I do."

The singer repeated that her impulse to create such intensely woman-centered spaces isn't born out of a desire to exclude.

"It's not about disempowerment of men—it's about empowering women," she said. "I'm always looking for the woman in the audience, young or old, who's feeling her own power because of our presence, making no apology for who we are and what we do."

Still, Choudhury-Potter's vision extends beyond the spaces she creates for the band and their fans. Though she sees little to love on the current political scene—before the massacre in Orlando, she was mourning the loss of her friend Julhas Mannan, an LGBT rights activist in Bangladesh, who was killed in April—she said she hopes that her woman-centered art will ultimately contribute to a less violent world.

"Orlando really brought to the surface again how easy it is to hate," she said. "I want to fight for being able to look in each other's eyes and say, 'We're cool, brother.' Hopefully the next generation won't have to be looking over their back like we are."

And she emphasized that every element of her "geeky, dark-skinned lesbian Muslim" identity figures into her equation for activism.

"Islam is the language and the set of stories that I grew up with," she said. "As an adult today I choose the bits of Islam that suit my nature."

When asked about the bit of Arabic script rendered in silver that she was wearing as a pendant—and that appears in just about every photo and video of the band—she leaned forward so that the pendant dangled below her neck.

"It says 'Allah,'" she replied. "That's my hijab." ■

Reporting for this story was supported by the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting.

Finding Love in the Heart of Skid Row

by Ariel Blandford
August 11, 2016

As the sun set over the Los Angeles downtown skyline, it illuminated cotton candy clouds and painted the row buildings in pastels, creating a watercolor world of barred windows and littered gutters. There was a warm stillness to Wall Street; no cars turned down the road and sleepy bodies wandered the sidewalks as the colors faded.

We were heading into the heart of Skid Row, the most densely populated area of homeless individuals in Los Angeles. With homelessness on the rise—47,000 in L.A. County, by a recent count—Skid Row has the highest unsheltered population in the United States. It was a heavenly sunset cradled in urban destitution. When we parked our car and opened the door, the smell of human effluence overcame our senses.

A lot of people have been asking me what I have been working on this summer, and I've struggled a bit explaining. I came to the University of Southern California's Center for Religion and Civic Culture (CRCC) as a video intern to work on a docu-series for the summer of 2016. The videos are focused on religious innovation and creativity in the greater Los Angeles area. The Skid Row project is a perfect example of the type of creative places CRCC is researching.

We went Skid Row late on a Friday night to cover a worship service hosted by The Row Church, a Christian congregation aiming at bringing God and community to the people of Skid Row. The church was founded by Pastor Cue Jn-Marie, a former Virgin Records rapper who left the music industry in 1994 to begin following God. In August 2006, Pastor Cue, as everyone calls him, set forth on building "a church without walls" that would defy the common structure of a house of worship. This place of faith would be located on the corner of Wall and Winston in downtown Los Angeles. Ten years later, Pastor Cue describes The Row Church as a place where the people of Skid Row can come together and find love on the streets.

As the sermon began people started to fill in the seats. Some were there to listen to Pastor Cue preach; some were simply looking for comfort on the metal chairs set up for the service. As Pastor Cue's voice broke the stagnant air and echoed through the intersection, onlookers observed what was going on. Some sat on the ground listening from far away, some played craps in the street, some just passed by, but the energy projected from Pastor Cue seemed to stimulate every person in earshot of the service. There was a sense of liveliness and connection, and as the sun set behind the towers of downtown, Skid Row came alive.

The seats were filled by the time the sun was gone. People stood behind the seats quietly chatting; one woman's arms spread wide, whispered to herself in tongues. The sermon lasted two and a half hours. As it came to an end, the distant listeners came over to line up for pizza provided by the church following the worship. People mingled, laughed and ate. They embraced each other and praised God under the warm light of the street lamps. It was a community brought together by the thoughtful act of kindness.

The Row Church describes itself online as a place where one can find beauty in the midst of chaos and ultimately, a place of refuge and hope. Skid Row is an important community of Los Angeles and is often overlooked because it is considered a problem. What The Row Church did and does every Friday night is invite people in with open arms via a common interest, the desire to belong. It unites a community that often seems unhinged and providing hope for those who have lost hope.

A man I met while filming explained to me that he has been coming to The Row Church since it started. He had met a churchgoer during a service who later got him a job on a construction site that allowed him move off of the streets.

He told me that he is one of many people who have had this experience. Pastor Cue and his church are acting as the spark that ignites the fire of change for those who are struggling to move off of the streets, lighting the way for those to follow.

My fellow video interns and I were there to film the service and capture the event, but I found something more. We were taking part in a significant piece of history. Through the simple acts of kindness brought to Skid Row by The

Row Church, the community was being pulled together. They were finding a place of acceptance and ultimately creating lasting positive relationships that would help shape which direction each individual person might go. As the last of the sunlight disseminated into the sky, we remind ourselves that nothing happens overnight. But, the path of progress is being paved by the labor of love. ■



ARIEL BLANDFORD

Millennials

Will the Real Evangelical Millennials Please Stand Up?

by Richard Flory
April 22, 2015

Lately the religion blogosphere has been all a twitter about a new book by Rachel Held Evans, who has documented her spiritual and religious path from being a good evangelical millennial to joining the Episcopal Church. Journalists, pundits and some evangelical leaders seem to be looking for the future of evangelical Christianity in Evans' story, but they should exercise caution in doing so. Evangelical Millennials won't likely follow her path into a mainline Protestant denomination. Still, her reasons for leaving are representative of broader trends within evangelicalism, although with somewhat different outcomes.

Evans' account echoes what we have read about younger evangelicals in academic and popular accounts, some of which I have written myself. Young people are increasingly dissatisfied with being evangelical due to the politicization of evangelical Christianity and to social-moral stances such as opposition to LGBT rights and gay marriage. Evans and other pundits add that many younger evangelicals are tired of the over-produced, franchised form of Christianity that emanates from the Evangelical Religion-Industrial Complex. As I've noted elsewhere, this includes not only the many megachurches that all seem cut from the same pattern, but also the publishing houses (including Evans' publisher), colleges, universities and seminaries that together form the core institutional infrastructure that produces evangelical culture.

The hubbub over what Evans represents is a more recent telling of something we identified more than a decade ago—that some younger evangelicals and Pentecostals were leaving their churches for the history, tradition and embodied experience of Christianity that Catholic, Orthodox and Episcopal Churches provide. As one Episcopal convert from evangelicalism told us then, “The incense, the spoken and sung liturgy, the kneeling, the Eucharist itself, all demanded participation in the beauty of the worship. It was like being in the orchestra instead of watching a performance.”

Evans has gone to great pains to express that theologically she is still essentially an evangelical, holding to what were once called the “fundamentals of the faith.” In this, she is not alone. The individuals we interviewed a dozen years ago didn't give up their core evangelical commitments. Instead, they saw the liturgical experiences and connection to history and tradition as a more authentic expression of their (evangelical) faith. They became evangelical and evangelistic Episcopalians, Catholics and Orthodox Christians, convinced that they had found the true expression of Christianity—which evangelicalism could never be. Just as Evans is doing now with her book tour, they sought to convince others of the superiority of their newfound spiritual and religious world.

I don't dispute the reasons for leaving evangelicalism. But the idea suggested by Evans' account that younger evangelicals are streaming out the back door of their neighborhood megachurch to become members of mainline or Catholic churches is just plain wrong. For a book I'm writing with Melinda Lundquist Denton, we've conducted surveys and in-depth interviews of a nationally representative sample of emerging adults over a ten-year period. They were teenagers when we first met them, and they were 23-28 years of age when we completed our fourth and last wave of data collection in the fall of 2013. They represent the heart of the so-called Millennial generation.

Based on our data, evangelical Millennials are decidedly not moving into mainline Protestant or Catholic churches in any significant numbers. Looking at just the young people who identified as evangelical when we first surveyed them as teenagers, only 5 percent moved to mainline Protestant denominations and only 2 percent moved to the Catholic Church. Fully 25 percent of these emerging adults now identify themselves as “not religious” and have few or no ties to any religious group.

Despite this bad news for evangelicals, in a current research project we're finding there is a vibrant movement of younger evangelicals who are neither leaving religion behind nor converting to liturgical forms of Christianity. Instead, they are forming their own churches. These churches are by any measure fully in line with historic evangelicalism, but are motivated by their members' desire for smaller congregations focused more explicitly on the spiritual and material needs of their local communities.

Most of these new churches differentiate themselves from their evangelical forebears by committing to being multi-ethnic and multi-class congregations. Some are also committed to being inclusive of the LGBT community. None are particularly interested in politics and culture wars as practiced and sponsored by the Evangelical Religion-Industrial Complex. Instead, any politics they may engage in relates to improving local schools, creating job opportunities, feeding and clothing the hungry and any number of other activities that seem to have been lost to evangelicalism as it has been practiced over the last 40 years.

So what might the future be for millennial evangelicals? I've begged off of answering this question in the past, but if I had to predict, I would say that any significant increase in movement from evangelicalism to mainline Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox churches is unlikely. Perhaps, though, these will continue to be a spiritual destination for the evangelical creative class. More likely, some younger evangelicals will continue to completely disaffiliate from organized religion, and some will continue to find fulfillment in the performance experience of Millennial-skewing megachurches like Hillsong. Others, however, will form their own communities that are no longer dependent on the larger evangelical culture machine. These groups will seek not only to serve the spiritual—and often material—needs of their members, but also those of their local communities.

Will any of these changes bring about a larger revitalization of evangelicalism? Maybe, but not by breathing new life into old evangelical organizations.

The shift in focus from “bigger is better” and “winning souls” to smaller churches, commitment to the local community and theologically informed service is significant. Even more significant is that these shifts have emerged from the deep desires of younger evangelicals to create spiritually vibrant and outward looking communities of faith, rather than settle for reproducing the culture they inherited from their parents' generation. ■

Will a Thriving Singles Scene Renew American Catholicism?

by Megan Sweas
February 16, 2016

This post originally appeared on Religion Dispatches.

As the choir rehearses before St. Monica's Sunday evening Mass, two blond women in skinny jeans slide into a pew in the rear of the church and chat quietly. A few pews back a woman wearing a mid-thigh length dress and a long sweater genuflects before beginning to pray. Before long, the church is filled with attractive people under 40.

St. Monica Catholic Community is a destination parish for young adults in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles with a reputation for being the place where young, attractive Catholics go to seek somebody special—and I don't mean Jesus.

The phenomenon isn't just a local one; the *New York Post* recently declared Old St. Patrick's Cathedral as that city's "sexiest congregation," and it's even garnered an entry in Urban Dictionary as "ass mass" (defined as "the place to go to hook up for both spiritual and booty worship").

Where They "Get Fed"

St. Monica, which is located in the cosmopolitan beach city of Santa Monica, is diverse by national standards, though the 5:30 p.m. service is filled mostly with young, white professionals, who arrive smartly dressed whether mass is followed by a workout or a night on the town.

Dating through a religious community isn't new or unique to Catholicism, of course. JDate turns twenty next year, and evangelicals (for whom "young adult" is often code for "single") have been known to seek out Bible studies with "cute" guys and girls.

But in a time of declining demographics, and an upswing in online dating, the popularity of such parishes appears almost as an act of defiance. According to the Pew Research Center, the Catholic share of the population has been dropping steadily and getting older. To make matters worse, 41 percent of Catholics ages 18-30 could imagine leaving the Catholic Church

someday. While 10 percent of millennials still consider themselves to be culturally Catholic, many already have left—most often to join the ranks of "nones."

Millennials' ambivalence challenges young adult ministries to evolve, says Paul Jarzembowski, assistant director for youth and young adult ministries at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The idea of driving across town to a destination parish like St. Monica instead of joining a neighborhood parish is a "no brainer" to them. "People will go where they are fed."

Even the idea that young adults need to be "fed" is new by Catholic standards, emerging only in the late 1960s. Father John Cusick, who established the first archdiocesan young adult ministry in Chicago in 1977, also had a hand in the development of Theology on Tap in the early 80s. Held in a bar, this lecture series was designed to attract young people who weren't necessarily showing up to church on Sunday morning. Dioceses around the country now have similar programs.

Delis Alejandro, pastoral associate at St. Monica, credits Cusick for many ideas that helped her build the Young Ministering Adults program (YMA) in the early 1980s, including taking flyers to bars in those pre-Facebook days. Much of what attracted young adults to St. Monica then remains attractive today. Sunday evening Mass works with young people's schedules and Alejandro has been intentional about making young adults—and women—visible as greeters, choir members and Eucharistic ministers. The homilies speak to them and ask something of them. There are plenty of opportunities to get involved, from service activities to social events. YMA now has 700 active people on its email list.

Young adult groups can give the sense that the church wants to marry people off so they will have Catholic babies, but Jarzembowski says this is a misperception. He notes that the Catholic

Church defines the young adult years—ages 19 to 39—as a time of transition, not only to marriage but also to school, first jobs, new cities and so on.

Indeed, marriage has changed dramatically in recent decades. In 1960, the average age for marriage was 20 for women and 23 for men. Today, it's 27 and 29 respectively. Nearly one-third of adults have never married, though more than half say they want to get married someday, and only 13 percent say they don't want to marry.

Still, the young adult Catholics at St. Monica see meeting potential partners as a byproduct rather than the goal of young adult ministry. At a post-Mass dinner for newcomers to the YMA, several of the 26 women and 14 men—both new and old members—say they're seeking friendship and community.

Most newcomers introduce themselves as transplants from around the country. A young man, visiting from Michigan, is checking out the church community to see if Santa Monica might be a good place to move.

A group leader emphasizes that through YMA you can go out to bars and talk about God, but in casual conversation others downplay religion, stressing that members are “normal” and not “Bible-thumping” Catholics.

Statements like these reflect the journeys many have taken. Afterward, three women tell me they were raised Catholic but hadn't been involved in the church for some time, while another young man tells me he's interested in spirituality but claims no religion.

They Get What Catholic Guilt Is

These days, Alejandro can't assume that young adults are steeped in Catholic culture. Many don't know or agree with church teaching, she says, and quite a few partner with non-Catholics.

It's the church's open-mindedness that appeals to Jessica Davis, a self-described “thinking Catholic” with a non-Catholic boyfriend. A note

in the bulletin about St. Monica's Gay Lesbian Outreach convinced Davis, who wanted “to make a community for myself,” that the church could be a welcoming, non-judgmental place for her, too. “When you're not excluding anybody, it's a safe place to be.”

Likewise, the church can be a safe place to meet a significant other. “In the back of a lot people's heads, they know this [congregation] has a group of people who could potentially be great matches,” says Jason Semko, a long-time YMA member. “There are a lot of high-quality people here, and the great thing is that you can get to know them as friends first.”

Religion serves as a filtering mechanism for many singles. About half of never-married adults say it's important to them to find a partner with shared religious and moral beliefs. Most secular dating sites allow you to list yourself and search others by religion, but there are dating services that cater specifically to Christians, Jews, or Muslims.

And, of course, there are many shades of “Catholic.”

St. Monica parishioner Molly Harrington, who isn't involved in YMA's dating scene, signed up for CatholicMatch.com during Lent one year. The site asks users whether they accept the church's teachings on seven issues, from the Eucharist and Immaculate Conception to contraception and premarital sex. She was disappointed to find that many people only accept two or three of the seven teachings. (Catholic Match doesn't release these statistics.)

“How does that make it any different than not being Catholic?” asks Harrington. “Why would you even go on a Catholic dating site if you really didn't believe in most of what is taught, except for maybe it's a cultural thing?”

The “cultural thing,” though, is important to a lot of people.

“Sarah,” who asked not to be identified, has dated atheists but prefers Catholics. “When you look at it objectively, it's kind of ridiculous to believe in God,” she says. “For somebody who

has never had that personal belief system, who wasn't raised that way, or who didn't experience that...it can be confusing."

Her current boyfriend, a Catholic whom she met through a friend, "gets it." To help her fall asleep one night, for instance, she took out a rosary to pray. "I left my rosary on his side table, and he knew exactly what it was," she says. "It's really nice to be with somebody who gets that cultural basis."

Plus, she adds, "they get what Catholic guilt is."

Shared faith doesn't guarantee a perfect match, of course. Sarah previously dated someone she met through St. Monica's YMA. They remain friends, but as she prefers not to see him at Mass, Sarah now attends one of St. Monica's morning Masses, whose more somber style turns out to be a better fit anyway.

"Even if you're completely over it and with somebody else, it's not conducive to quiet prayer," Sarah says.

In this sense, dating through church might be riskier for the more devout. Of course, as Cynthia Kron, who runs the L.A.-based singles ministry Catholics Click, points out: this is the very group that cares most about dating fellow Catholics.

One woman told her she wouldn't date at her church, "because if we broke up, I'd want custody of this Mass." Another told her he'd switch parishes once he found a girlfriend.

After converting to Catholicism six years ago, Kron herself spent time "church hopping" with the hope of finding both community and meeting Mr. Right. "It was sort of this merry-go-round," she says. "It's exhausting, and then you don't have a home base for your faith."

"I know that there are people who are strategic. They're serious about their faith, but they're going for places where there are [larger] numbers," Kron says.

Not Just About Brides and Grooms

Dating drama can make YMA seem like high school, one young woman tells me over a beer at a Sunday night trivia event (indeed, many YMA members suspect that some only show up the social events for the dating pool).

But the group at the bar has come directly from Mass. As they talk, older members make sure that the half-dozen newcomers are included. Nobody drinks excessively or pairs off, despite some flirting.

Millennials are looking for deep connections, not a clique, Jarzembowski says. "Even if the sexiest congregation has a social element, that congregation also needs to be cautious not to be closed on itself."

It used to be assumed that young Catholics come back to the church when they get married or have children. That can't be assumed anymore, especially as more Catholics marry non-Catholics or don't marry at all. But on the flipside, says Jarzembowski, if young adult ministry is all about meeting Mr. or Mrs. Right, the church runs the risk of losing couples as soon as they pair off.

Four months into their marriage, Mike Steinberger and his wife are still involved in the group because they've benefit from it not only as a couple, but as individuals.

Like many others, Steinberger had been away from the church and came to St. Monica looking for a "community that nurtured my faith." He had been involved for a few years when he and his now-wife became friends while running Tuesday Night Vespers, which he describes as a "mini-retreat" to distinguish it from traditional Vespers.

"Am I shocked that throwing myself in with a group of like-minded people, I found somebody I fell in love with? No, that's not surprising."

At Mass the Steinbergers are two pews back, and another couple sits directly in front of me. The other young adults surrounding me seemed to be alone.

The second reading includes the passage, “Love is patient; love is kind...” It’s one Msgr. Lloyd Torgerson hears often at the many marriages he celebrates at St. Monica each year, he says in his homily.

But Paul the Apostle “wasn’t writing to brides and grooms,” he says. “He was writing to the community of Corinth who was fighting like cats and dogs. That’s a much stronger message... It’s for all of us.”

Even if some young Catholics come to St. Monica primarily for the dating pool it doesn’t bother Torgerson. “I don’t care why they come,” he says, “I care about how they leave.” ■



Young Catholics Drawn to Pope Francis. Church Life and Dogma? Not So Much

by Megan Sweas
September 24, 2015

**This article originally appeared on
Religion News Service.**

When Regina Bunye catches sight of Pope Francis in Philadelphia on Saturday (Sept. 26), it won't be her first glimpse of the pontiff. Last year, she took part in a pilgrimage to Rome, where she got within 20 feet of Francis, who waved to her group.

"It's kind of like seeing a rock star up close," said Bunye, 36. "He is just a connection away from St. Peter and then Jesus ... and he's an incredible man."

Like Bunye, the young adults descending on Philadelphia this week may be Francis' biggest fans.

When Regina Bunye catches sight of Pope Francis in Philadelphia on Saturday (Sept. 26), it won't be her first glimpse of the pontiff. Last year, she took part in a pilgrimage to Rome, where she got within 20 feet of Francis, who waved to her group.

Yet, as a repeat pilgrim, weekly Mass-goer and parish volunteer, Bunye represents a fading demographic: young adult Catholics intensely involved in their church.

Only 15 percent of American millennials define their religion as Catholic, compared with 20 percent of all Americans, according to a recent Pew Research Center poll. Another 10 percent say they are only culturally Catholic, and 9 percent have left the church.

Even among self-identifying young Catholics, most practice their religion sporadically, said University of Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith, who has studied Catholic millennials through the National Study of Youth and Religion. A small minority is engaged in the church, he said, and they typically don't follow traditional Catholic teachings.

Various studies find that anywhere from 15 percent to 30 percent of young Catholics go to Mass weekly.

But for Bunye, the church "has been part of my life from the very beginning."

She grew up in a Filipino Catholic family in Hawaii, and her mom taught religious education.

In college, she attended church, but classes and socializing took precedence. After graduation, she found herself wanting a faith community. When she moved to Los Angeles, she joined the choir at Blessed Sacrament Parish, a Jesuit church in Hollywood.

"It's true—when you sing you pray twice!" Bunye said.

While singing in a choir at a contemporary Sunday evening Mass a few years ago, Bunye got the idea to start a young adult group at Blessed Sacrament.

"I could see all these other young adults, but ... we didn't know each other," said Bunye.

Since 2013, Ignatian Young Adults has developed a small but strong core of members. Like Bunye, most have gone on retreats with Christus Ministries, the Jesuit young adult program through which she traveled to Rome. But building the group beyond this core has been difficult.

"I was told that starting a young adult ministry, you cannot have high expectations as far as attendance and regularity of members, and that's certainly been the case," Bunye said. "Young adults come and go, especially in LA."

Since Bunye started the young adult group, church has become even more central to her life. By day she works in casting for television, but she spends much of her free time planning young adult events and serving on the parish council. She even met her boyfriend through the group, though she emphasizes that Ignatian Young Adults is a spiritual community rather than a social group.

Because of her parish involvement, Bunye was asked to represent Blessed Sacrament in Philadelphia.

But she won't be attending the World Meeting of Families, a convention held every three years in a different city and intended to bring traditional Catholic families together for panels and workshops.

Bunye may be fully committed to the church, but like most young adults, she is not a traditionalist.

“In regards to matters of absolute faith, I believe,” Bunye said. “In regards to matters that are relevant to today’s world, I think the church needs to find ways to adapt.”

Pope Francis’ “who am I to judge?” attitude toward LGBT individuals is a step in the right direction, she added.

Between 56 percent and 74 percent of young Catholics say the church should accept gay marriage, birth control, divorced and cohabiting couples, and female and married priests, according to the Pew survey.

Instead of the World Meeting of Families, Bunye will represent Blessed Sacrament at the Faith Matters in America Summit, a PICO Network event held concurrently with the pope’s visit and focused on “the sins of racism and economic exclusion and exploitation.”

Bunye joined Blessed Sacrament not only for the choir but also for the Jesuits’ emphasis on social justice.

Her grandfather ran prisons in the Philippines and advocated a more humane approach. She’s followed in his footsteps by getting involved in criminal justice issues and supporting the Jesuits’ gang reduction ministry, Homeboy Industries.

The Jesuits, she said, “provide a wonderful example for me and other young adults who want to do something with our faith.”

The way Pope Francis lives out his faith in a broken world is what attracts young adults to him, said Darius Villalobos, director of the Young Adult Ministry Office for the Archdiocese of Chicago. Moreover, Francis does it with joy.

“A faith that is excited and enthusiastic and happy—that’s attractive to anyone, but especially for young people, it’s inspiring,” said Villalobos, who is bringing 52 young people to Philadelphia to see the pope.

Young adult Catholics may be declining in numbers, but Pope Francis’ joy will be palpable in the expected million-plus pilgrims in Philadelphia.

“My faith is buoyed in finding the faith in others,” Bunye said. “When I’m back home, it’s a great encouragement.” ■

An “Everybody Friendly, Artist-Driven, God-Optional” Jewish New Year

by Tobin Belzer
October 11, 2016

Most of my memories of Jewish worship services are an amalgamation of the hundreds of services I’ve attended throughout my life. But there are a few that stand out. At a Shabbat service years ago, the leader, Amichai Lau-Lavie—who was then a performance artist and Jewish educator—said something like: “Trying to pray using a prayer book is like attempting to have sex while holding the Kamasutra.”

As is the case across traditions, Jewish organizations are concerned about the decline of religious affiliation and are looking for new ways to keep people interested in religion. Amichai has developed a thriving career of making Jewish texts and stories accessible with his ability to use dramatic flair to engage people in religious ritual. In 1999, he founded “Storahtelling,” a theater troupe (and later an education and training institute) that developed a method to revitalize the experience of reading the Torah—a central aspect of the Jewish worship service. Instead of how it’s usually done—a single person stands before a congregation looking down and chanting what they’re reading (in Hebrew) from an unscrolling Torah—a Storahtelling troupe imparts biblical stories in English and Hebrew, using drama, music and humor while breaking the fourth wall to share reflective observations as well as snarky comments.

This year for Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, I traveled to New York City to attend Lab/Shul, the latest innovative offering from Amichai, who recently was ordained as a rabbi, and his talented team of artists, musicians and educators. Lab/Shul is an “everybody-friendly, artist-driven and God-optional experimental community for sacred Jewish gathering.” This year (2016/5777) marked Lab/Shul’s fourth Rosh Hashanah “worship event,” as it is conspicuously called, rather than “service,” which is more typically used.

Attentiveness to language and aesthetics is a key aspect of Lab/Shul’s innovative approach. Much like receiving a playbill when entering a

theater, each attendee was handed an informational booklet as they entered the venue. The cover illustrated the theme of this year’s High Holidays, re:love, with a Keith Haring-esque graphic figure holding a heart. In his welcome note, Amichai described his motivation for this branding decision: “... [I]n the face of toxic politics, communication breakdowns, and digital distractions, we’re returning to the basics: what, who and how we love.” He grounded this universalistic pursuit in Jewish particularism, explaining: “‘Love’ as a verb, is a central Jewish value, echoing throughout generations as both commandment and plea.” Also included were selections from *All About Love: New Visions* by feminist social activist, bell hooks.

The High Holiday branding was consistent throughout the event: The logo was also featured at the bottom of each slide projected onto a huge screen, in lieu of a prayer book. Each prayer was included in Hebrew, transliteration and English translation. (While relatively common in churches, projection screens are less frequently used in synagogues, where attitudes about the acceptability of incorporating technology vary considerably.)

While reading a translation of a prayer that I found incredibly poignant and moving, I thought: “I should read the English more often.” I stopped reading the English translations years ago, because at best, the words didn’t speak to me and at worst they included sentiments I found offensive. A moment later, Amichai stopped to call attention to how the Hebrew speakers among us likely noticed that the English translations are far from direct.

The “Sources and Inspiration” section of the booklet elaborates, acknowledging that for many, “[T]he traditional words of worship often present a barrier to finding meaning and connection.” In an effort to “attempt to make prayer accessible, relatable and honest to our personal experiences,” they’ve made a number of liturgical modifications. One major change, they explain, is in their use of God language:



“We’ve replaced the baggage-laden word ‘God’ with a multiplicity of other names and prisms that reflect the diversity of historical and personal interpretations of what is ultimately beyond language.” These changes and the many others that Lab/Shul is incorporating into its events are the result of purposeful reflection about how to effectively merge the method (how we pray) with the meaning (why we pray).

There are communities around the country that are heeding the same impulse by using a variety of innovative approaches. Lab/Shul is one of seven Jewish communities that make up the Jewish Emergent Network.* The leaders of these communities “share...a devotion to revitalizing the field of Jewish engagement, a commitment to approaches both traditionally rooted and creative, and a demonstrated success in attracting unaffiliated and disengaged Jews to a rich and meaningful Jewish practice.” Each community’s approach to coupling meaning and method is unique. Some are comfortable with more traditional God-language, see prayer books as a

valuable tool and take a less theatrical approach than Lab/Shul. Others emphasize social justice or practices embedded in Jewish culture.

These communities appeal to people, like me, who are not interested in conventional religious practice and affiliation, but are not “nones” (the growing share of individuals who are unaffiliated with any organized religion). By adapting and transforming Jewish ritual and tradition, these groups appeal to the scores of people who want something in between: those of us who are looking for “some.” ■

** With her colleague Ari Y. Kelman, Belzer will be working for the next four years to support the Jewish Emergent Network Fellowship by facilitating organizational learning through evaluation. The Fellowship, the first major collaborative effort of the Network, aims to train the next generation of rabbis to “take on the challenges and realities of 21st century Jewish life in America in a variety of settings.”*



KATE GLICKSBERG (HTTP://WWW.INTERSTATIAL.COM/)

How a New Generation Is Changing Evangelical Christianity

by Richard Flory
October 31, 2016

This article was originally published on *The Conversation*.

Since the late 1970s, American evangelicalism has been largely identified with right-wing politics. Conservative religious values entered the political sphere through movements such as Moral Majority and Focus on the Family that opposed gay rights, abortion, feminism and other liberal issues.

Evangelical leaders have influenced national elections and public policy. They have been instrumental in pushing the Republican Party toward increasingly conservative social policies. They have generally been the most consistent voting bloc within the Republican Party.

But, evangelical Christianity, as we have known it, is changing. While old guard evangelical leaders are vocally supporting Republican nominee Donald Trump for president, there is a groundswell of opposition from within evangelicals.

My research focus is on vibrant religious congregations. I am seeing the emergence of a new generation of evangelicals that has a very different view of what it means to be a “Jesus follower.”

This generation is abstaining from the political theology of the earlier generation and focusing their attention, instead, on improving the lives of people in their local communities.

History of Evangelicals

The groundwork for American-style conservative evangelicalism was laid several decades before the rise of the Moral Majority and Focus on the Family movements. Evangelicals, and their forbears the “fundamentalists,” had long made education and mass communication a centerpiece of their efforts. Starting in the late 19th century, they established post-secondary Bible training schools and utilized various mass media outlets, such as their own magazines and radio stations to get their religious message out.

After World War II, these efforts expanded to include elementary and secondary schools—now numbering almost 3,000, along with approximately 150 evangelical colleges and seminaries in the U.S. In addition, evangelicals expanded their media efforts in publishing (books and national periodicals such as *Christianity Today*), radio and television.

Even though these schools and media outlets were independent from each other, they were unified in a shared theological and moral perspective that served to reproduce evangelical culture and beliefs, and to disseminate the religiously tinged political message of the religious right.

Rifts Within

This once-unified movement is now dividing over whether to support Donald Trump in the general election.

Old guard evangelicals such as the founder of the Focus on the Family movement James Dobson and Jerry Falwell Jr., son of the Moral Majority founder and current president of Liberty University, are warning of dire consequences for the U.S. if Trump is not elected.

According to Dobson, without a Trump presidency, the U.S. will “see a massive assault on religious liberty,” which would “limit what pastors... can say publicly,” and would “severely restrict the freedoms of Christian schools, nonprofit organizations, businesses, hospitals, charities, and seminaries.”

But not all evangelicals are supporting Trump, even though they remain true to the Republican Party. These evangelicals are alarmed at what they see as the vulgar and immoral lifestyle that Trump exemplifies.

In the past, mobilizing this vast religious and political machinery would have resulted in overwhelming and unquestioning support for the Republican candidate. This was first seen with Ronald Reagan in 1980 who won the White House with widespread support of evangelicals, and has been repeated in each election since.

But this time, a call to support Trump has exposed deep divisions within evangelicals that have gone unnoticed until now.

The point is that Trump represents to many the very antithesis of the kind of moral probity that evangelical leaders have spent their lives defending.

Differences over social and moral issues

How did this happen? While the mostly white religious right was gaining political and cultural power over the last 40 years, evangelicalism became as much a political and racial identity as a religious or theological one.

Survey research and election polls have failed to differentiate the differences within the movement between whites, Latinos, African-Americans and Asians who all share the same basic evangelical theology, but who may part company over other social and moral issues.

For example, in most surveys and political polls, “evangelical” is limited to white believers, with others who may be similar theologically being classified into other racial/ethnically identified categories such as “Black Protestant,” “Latino Protestant” or “Other nonwhite Protestant.”

Further, as with all religious groups in the U.S., the evangelical movement began struggling to keep its young people in the fold. Recent research shows that among young adults who were identified as evangelicals as teenagers, only 45 percent can still be identified as such.

A New Generation

At its most basic level, American evangelicalism is characterized by a belief in the literal truth of the Bible, a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ,” encouraging others to be “born again” in Jesus and a lively worship culture. This definition encompasses many groups that were not historically included in the old religious right. Thus, while Latino evangelicals believe the same thing about the Bible and Jesus as white evangelicals, their particular social context in many cases leads to a different political stance.

As these new and growing groups find their own voices, they are challenging the dominant evangelical perspective on political issues such as immigration and economic inequality.

For example, the Evangelical Immigration Table, established in 2014, has been working across a broad spectrum of evangelical churches and other institutions to highlight what they see as the biblical imperative to support a just and humane immigration policy. These groups range from the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention to the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference.

In addition, younger evangelicals are increasingly coming of age in more diverse neighborhoods and schools, leading to an openness to other racial and religious groups, LGBT people and social justice issues in ways that older evangelicals strenuously opposed.

Further, while the educational successes of evangelicalism, through its many and varied curricula, have served to socialize young people into the “biblically based” moral world, it has also taught them how to read the Bible critically and to pay attention to biblical themes and narrative through-lines that resonate with their own life experiences.

According to a pastor of a church included in my research, he is seeing young evangelicals apply the interpretive skills they have learned in school and church to a broader range of biblical teachings.

“When you start to examine the teachings of Jesus, you’re going to end up seeing that justice matters, that we have a responsibility to care for the poor. Younger evangelicals are basically using those same hermeneutical tools to study the Bible and are saying, wait a minute, not only is there nothing wrong with caring about justice, there’s something wrong with not [caring].”

Thus, while young evangelicals in some ways still evidence a shared theology with their parents’ generation—for example, on biblical passages that would support a “pro-life” perspective—they part company through their engagement with passages that emphasize the believer’s responsibility for the poor.

View of Social Justice

The younger evangelicals that I’ve been studying are not taking the expected evangelical position in this election, such as supporting Donald Trump, or supporting a broader agenda as that promoted by evangelical leaders such as James Dobson.

Instead, the political activism that these younger evangelicals tend to engage in usually relates to issues like improving local schools, creating job opportunities, caring for the homeless and other activities that have been largely overlooked by American evangelicalism as it has been practiced over the past several decades.

In my interviews, I’ve asked many of these younger evangelicals how their religious commitments relate to politics. Their responses show a simultaneous distancing from “politics,” and a desire to seek change in a way that is consistent with their beliefs. A good example of this kind of response came from a 20-something African-American young woman who told me, “I also don’t care much for politics, because it’s so ugly. I just feel like, let’s commit to loving people. When I think about laws that unjustly affect minorities or the poor, that bothers me only because of the Gospel.”

Diverse World View

These evangelicals have staked out a middle ground that is neither Democrat nor Republican, liberal or conservative. This is not to say that younger evangelicals are all in agreement with how their religious views should be applied in the world. Rather, they are opting out of the political identities and battles that have characterized evangelicalism for the past 40 years.

Their world is more diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, social class, sexuality, and religious beliefs. Their friends are as likely to be straight or gay, Christian or Buddhist, or black or Latino.

That has informed the way that they understand their religious beliefs and their political alignments. They are seeking to live out their faith in response to a world that is different from the world that leaders of the old religious right inhabit. ■

Apocalypse Later: Millennial Evangelicals, Israel-Palestine and the Kingdom of God

by Nick Street
December 1, 2016

MILLENNIALS

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White conservative Christians voted overwhelmingly for Donald J. Trump in the recent presidential election, reaffirming the apparently unbreakable bond that has united evangelicals and the GOP since Ronald Reagan's landslide electoral victory in 1980. While VP-elect Mike Pence, a staunch opponent of LGBT rights, provided cover for Trump's vacillation on same-sex marriage during this year's campaign, both Trump and Pence were unambiguous in their opposition to abortion and their support for Israel—the linchpins of evangelicals' participation in the Republican coalition since the Reagan era.

But beneath the headlines that suggest the past as prologue to the next presidential contest, demographic and theological shifts among younger evangelicals are beginning to complicate the story.

News of protesters clashing with police in Ferguson, Missouri, along with images of Israel's devastating bombardment of Gaza, topped newsfeeds in August 2014. Both stories were topics of conversation that month as 300 worshipers gathered at New City Church, an evangelical congregation that makes its home in a rented theater in downtown Los Angeles. New City is a remarkably accurate mirror of the surrounding neighborhood—not just ethnically diverse but also drawing members across the full range of downtown's socioeconomic spectrum, from loft-dwelling hipsters to barely-scraping-by addicts living on Skid Row.

Just before the senior pastor's sermon, a pastoral intern named Delonte Gholston delivered a riveting prayer in which he connected racial injustice and abuses of power in Ferguson with tensions between LAPD officers and Skid Row's enormous homeless population, and with the cycle of violence between Israelis and Palestinians. Gholston, 34, concluded his prayer

by asking God to bestow mercy and grace on the stakeholders in each of those conflicts.

Gholston's social justice focus is one shared by a rising generation of young city-dwelling evangelicals, who want to combat poverty, racism, and violence. They're trying to forge better lives here on earth and not just look to the afterlife. And their concern for all parties in the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict represents a dramatic departure from the worldview that characterized the previous generation of evangelicals, who saw unstinting American support for Israel as essential to fulfilling biblical prophecies about the Apocalypse and Jesus' subsequent return to earth.

"I struggle with a stream of evangelical thought that suggests that we should speed up the day when the end comes," Gholston, who recently received a Master of Divinity degree from the evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, said later. "Or that says, right or wrong, it doesn't matter what they do, we support Israel."

According to a recent Pew survey, sympathy for the Palestinians is on the rise among all millennials in the United States. That development, coupled with the growing generational shift reflected in Gholston's prayer, has profound implications not just for evangelicalism but also for the future of American politics and foreign policy.

Paul D. Miller is associate director of the Clements Center for National Security at the University of Texas and a former National Security Council staff member. He has closely studied the relationship between evangelicalism and American policy toward Israel-Palestine. He said, "Something like 80 or 90 percent of the older generation of evangelicals still believes in dispensational theology"—the tradition of biblical interpretation that regards Jews as God's chosen people and anticipates the return of Jesus after an apocalyptic war that will begin in Israel. "It has become sort of a marker of tribal identity," Miller added. "They think, 'We're against all

those secular pagans who hate Israel and hate America.”

According to Miller, since the 1970s, mainstream American evangelicals have reflexively supported the state of Israel, usually at the expense of Palestinians. That decade saw the release of Hal Lindsey’s *Late Great Planet Earth*, which popularized the dispensational strand of biblical interpretation at the same time conservative Cold War geopolitical agendas found reliable support in the emergent Religious Right.

But Miller said that evangelicals who came of age since the end of the Cold War have become less interested in mapping end-times theology onto geopolitics and more engaged with social justice issues like homelessness and economic inequality. “The younger generation doesn’t buy into dispensational theology,” Miller said. “And it doesn’t want to be beholden to GOP. It generally wants to be a prophetic voice on problems at the local level.”

Specifically, this group is shifting its theological focus away from future-oriented biblical prophecy and toward a concern for ways to apply some of the Bible’s key themes—hope, justice, redemption and love, for example—to solve problems in the here-and-now.

“My dad is huge on End Times prophetic stuff,” said Ephraim Gatlula, a 26-year-old member of The Branch, an evangelical church in a working-class neighborhood on the east side of Long Beach. “I’m a believer that God didn’t tell us specifically what’s going to happen and when he’s going to do it, so why bother looking through the scripture for it? Why bother spending even an ounce of effort trying to do that?” Gatlula said he wants to focus instead on addressing the needs of homeless people and the “working poor” in the neighborhood that the Branch calls home. “It’s just about service,” he said. “It’s about being God’s hands and feet in the community.”

Gatlula’s pastor and the founder of the Branch is 37-year-old Derrick Engoy. He said that the commitment to service that he promotes in his congregation also includes cultivating good relationships with religious “others” whom earlier generations of evangelicals tended to regard with suspicion or even hostility. “In many ways, even in my early upbringing in Christianity, it was very exclusive,” Engoy said. “It was, ‘Here’s this club that if you’re not a part of you’re going to hell.’” But growing up in a diverse community in Long Beach made him question these beliefs. “I was exposed to different religions,” he said. “Because I had a little bit of understanding from some of my Muslim friends, I’m able to have a decent conversation with a Muslim about God without wanting to rip each other’s throats.”

Engoy said he sees the goal of working for the Kingdom of God not as the establishment of a religiously purified future but rather as an ongoing commitment to the flourishing of present-day Long Beach. He and his flock of about 100 members have developed projects like a food pantry, feeding programs for the local homeless population and monthly laundry service for the working poor, leveraging networks beyond their association with evangelical fellow-travelers. “We’re looking for ways to partner with what’s already going on,” Engoy said. “Because the reality is we’re not bringing God to people; God’s already there.”

He added, “As headed to Hell as some people would paint Long Beach as, God’s doing work there. So it’s us saying, ‘God, how are you working in the city both within the faith movements and outside the faith movements, to bring life to people?’”

Authorities on American Christianity say this tendency to see complexity and possibility where earlier generations of evangelicals saw only stark distinctions between believers and nonbelievers has definitely taken root among millennials. “Younger evangelicals are experiencing a world that among older evangelicals tends to be more

black and white,” said David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, an evangelical Christian research firm that specializes in religious trends and demographics. For instance, he said, “They’re pro-Israel, but not pro-Israel in the same way as their more conservative parents and grandparents.” Instead, they may see Israel as a natural ally, but they do not think of the state as a means to the end-times.

This evolution in evangelical culture and politics is often overlooked by news organizations that view religious groups as unchanging over time, and that prioritize stories about conflict over developments that are equally important but less sensationalistic. “Mainstream media have a hard time believing that younger evangelicals are different from older evangelicals,” Kinnaman said. “But there’s been an attitude shift about Kingdom theology, along with a shift in the view of culture. Where older evangelicals tend to think of the country as a Christian nation, the younger generation sees a post-Christian context.”

That shift in what evangelicals mean when they talk about working for the Kingdom of God is the key to understanding how these movements will likely influence American politics and foreign policy. “The rhetoric about the imminent return of Jesus has changed in various ways,” said Randall Balmer, holder of the Phillips Chair in Religion at Dartmouth College and author of *The Making of Evangelicalism: From Revivalism to Politics and Beyond*. “And that in turn changes the way the Kingdom language is used.”

Balmer said that evangelicals who came of age during the Cold War saw godlessness abroad and the stirrings of sexual liberation at home as heralds of the apocalypse, after which Jesus would return to Israel and establish the Kingdom of God on earth. “In the 1950s, the attitude was, ‘Come, Lord Jesus,’” Balmer said.

During the 2008 presidential campaign, even as older stalwarts like James Dobson and Chuck Colson argued that opposition to legal abortion and same-sex marriage should be the

primary driver of evangelicals’ engagement in politics, Balmer started noticing a different set of priorities from young evangelicals on college campuses. “I kept hearing about war, hunger, disease, torture and climate change,” he said. “They would also say, ‘We think abortion is wrong and homosexuality is wrong,’ but there was very little passion behind that statement.” He added, “It’s a return not just to the Social Gospel but earlier in the nineteenth century, when evangelicals were advocating for people margins of society.”

The Kingdom of God for these young evangelicals is on earth right now. The implications of this seemingly subtle shift within evangelicalism are in fact profound. From one generation to the next, the idea of the Kingdom of God has moved from religiously pure (read: conservatively Christian) and established after a period of apocalyptic upheaval to a vision of communities of mutual concern that support diverse forms of human flourishing in the here-and-now. That vision for the United States doesn’t mean that believers like Delonte Gholston and Derrick Engoy have abandoned their engagement with politics and culture—far from it. Rather, they are promoting a different vision of what it means to spread the Christian gospel, coupled with some healthy wariness of the efforts of previous generations of evangelicals to bring about the Kingdom of God (the post-apocalyptic Israel) through politics.

If the Promised Land is no longer identified exclusively with the state of Israel, evangelicals like Gholston and Engoy—along with many of their religiously unaffiliated fellow millennials—are engaging their communities in ways that will upend the usual narratives about their generation. That, in turn, may alter coalitions that have shaped American politics since the 1980s.

Asked what it means to work for the Kingdom of God, Engoy said, “Israel is wherever I am.” ■

Religious Nones

A Meditation on the Nones

by Nalika Gajaweera
July 2, 2014

RELIGIOUS NONES

Anna Stephens was on a humanitarian mission to Sudan with the International Red Cross when she first read *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* by Eckhart Tolle. For Anna, raised Catholic in a suburban community in Connecticut, the book was her first foray into contemporary Eastern spirituality. Five years later and now living in West L.A., Anna finds her life deeply immersed in the do-it-yourself practices of spiritual awakening. Along with the daily home practice of Insight meditation, she also connects with others through weekly Hatha yoga classes in Venice Beach, an occasional ten-day silent retreat at the Southern California Vipassana Center in Joshua Tree or the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts. She also schedules regular checking-in time with her spiritual counselor in Berkeley via Skype.

But while Anna's life seems in many ways imbued with spirituality, and though she may incorporate various ideas about *Karma* and *Metta* (loving-kindness) into her personal spiritual worldview, when asked what religion she identifies with, she would be reluctant to affiliate herself with any particular group or movement. Her type of religious un-affiliation is a growing phenomenon in the United States. A recent Pew poll found that one-fifth of the U.S. public—and a third of adults under 30—are now religiously unaffiliated “nones”—a 15 percent increase in just the past five years. In fact, 37 percent of this group of “nones” classify themselves as “spiritual but not religious.”

One of the spiritual practices that's flourishing among this particular segment of the “nones” is Insight, or Vipassana, meditation. Although based on Buddhist principles of self-transformation through self-observation to gain insight into the impermanence of the self, Vipassana meditation is being introduced with minimal reference to its Buddhist roots into wellness programs, anger management courses, grade-school curricula, addiction and recovery treatment and other therapeutic settings as method of stress

reduction, pain management and self-understanding.

An explosion of research on the neuroscience of mindfulness has also supported the growing popularity of meditation, with research centers at UC San Diego, UCLA and elsewhere focused on fostering mindful awareness through education and research.

But apart from these secular-medicalized spheres of meditation, the American meditation movement is most significantly propagated and shared with people like Anna by lay teachers, who distribute their books and podcasts and hold retreats in places that are not typically associated with the “traditionally religious.” In such contexts, meditation is proffered as a personal and inward affective experience, unaccompanied by dogma, hierarchies of authority, issues of cultural preservation or even concern for the forging of communal bonds. As such, these practitioners are much more likely to describe their involvement with implicitly Buddhist practice as “spiritual” but not “religious.”

While spirituality without religion appears to be a new phenomenon today, the historical emergence of contemporary Eastern spirituality movements like Vipassana in the 1970s suggests that the groundwork for this type of spirituality was laid by counter-culture segments of earlier generations. These Baby Boomer seekers traveled to other parts of the world to learn meditative disciplines under the tutelage of Asian teachers who were part of this 20th century modernization movement. As Jack Kornfield, one of the senior American Vipassana teachers, has said, “We wanted to offer the powerful practices of Insight meditation, as many of our teachers did, as simply as possible without the complications of rituals, robes, chanting and the whole religious tradition.”

One of the purposes of the CRCC's Religious Competition and Creative Innovation project is to identify and research religious congregations and organizations in Southern California that are innovating in the ways in which they prac-

tice, organize, interpret and communicate their religious faith, and also how they relate to other groups (within their faith and outside their faith tradition).

As we explore the multifaceted religious landscape of the region, we are sure to encounter networks of spiritual practice emerging around observances like Insight meditation and yoga that do not fit easily or unambiguously with what is recognized as “properly religious.” Indeed, there seems to be a move away from theistic orthodoxies to alternative spiritual sensibilities, many of which are taking place in the personal domain, largely outside of institutional influence.

As the Pew Center’s research shows, “roughly three-in-ten religiously unaffiliated adults say they believe in spiritual energy in physical objects and in yoga as a spiritual practice. About a quarter believe in astrology and reincarnation. In addition, nearly six-in-ten of the religiously unaffiliated say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth; about three-in-ten say they have felt in touch with someone who is dead; and 15% have consulted a psychic.”

In light of these findings, some of the questions we might then consider in this study are how these trends relate to the diminution of institutionalized religious practice in America and, furthermore, how are churches, temples, synagogues and mosques responding to these changes in American spiritual/religious life? What we may find is that the nature of these responses are powerfully shaping innovation within religious institutions. ■

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“There is a move away from theistic orthodoxies to alternative spiritual sensibilities, many of which are taking place in the personal domain, largely outside of institutional influence.”

The Tidal Wave of Indifference: I Don't Church, I Brunch

*by Richard Flory, Brie Loskota and Rebecca Sager
September 3, 2014*

RELIGIOUS NONES

A lot has been written recently about the spiritual-but-not-religious crowd, or the “religious nones”—people who have no particular religious affiliation—and how their numbers are rapidly growing in the U.S. Recent reports place “nones” between just under 20 percent to as much as 23 percent of American adults. The largest segment of the population that claims no religious affiliation are young people under 30 years of age (32 percent), with the next-least-affiliated group those between 30 and 49 (21 percent).

Closer analysis of these trends reveal that the majority of the “nones” are interested in spirituality, and many are still drawn toward certain religious practices. But regardless of how this development is described or measured, the upshot is that people are going to religious services less frequently than in previous generations, and our traditional definitions of religion and religious institutions are mattering less in the daily lives of younger Americans. In our view, however, this does not mean that we are entering a new age of atheism or irreligion, but instead signals what we would describe as a coming wave of religious indifference.

Among the many reasons for the increasing numbers of “nones” and the decreasing ability of religious organizations to successfully appeal to people who otherwise have some religious affinity, we suggest the following five are the most important:

- Traditional authority structures, including religious ones, have been flattened through broad access to knowledge. As a result, everyone and no one is an authority, which reduces the need for traditional “authorities” of any sort, let alone religious authorities. This democratization of knowledge has demystified all forms of authority, with that of a religious nature taking a particularly bad hit. Traditional religious groups, denominations, congregational leaders, etc. have yet to fully acknowledge, let alone respond to this change.
- As urban and suburban communities become more diverse, differences between groups, whether these are cultural, racial, ethnic or religious, have become less important. When you grow up with friends and neighbors who are as likely to be different from you as they are to be similar to you, those differences mean less. Yet religious groups have not been able to address how the coming together of a multitude of communities can potentially relativize the beliefs, practices and experiences of their members.
- Religion has a bad brand. From the hyper-politicization of evangelicalism beginning in the 1970s to the recent Supreme Court decision in favor of Hobby Lobby’s religious exemption to parts of the Affordable Care Act, religion per se has taken a beating. Many younger people we have come across, including those from seemingly successful groups like evangelicals, are reluctant to identify themselves as “religious.” Instead of darkening the door of their local congregation, they have begun meeting fellow travelers in private homes, bars, coffee shops and the like, often without the participation of a traditional minister of any sort. The unorthodox venue and the absence of “authorized” religious personnel, combined with the likelihood that some source other than a classical sacred text is often the focus of discussion, suggests a further distancing from traditional forms of religious expression.
- Increasing competition for the attention of potentially religious people from work, family responsibilities, social media and other activities means that religion more often loses out to commitments that people deem more important to the formation of identity, meaning and community. Involvement with a religious group often appears to be yet another social chore rather than a time of reflection, conversation and renewal. Who needs that?

- If American culture is defined by any one concept, it is personal choice. Individuals choose professional affiliations, diets, club memberships and myriad other associations, yet religious institutions have been slow to recognize and respond to what people might want from their spiritual communities. And even those that have been responsive to this ethic of individual choice, such as megachurches, have often been unwitting drivers of the trends that send people out the church doors. Why go to church to meet friends for coffee or shopping when there are many options for those activities that offer a greater sense of authenticity and spontaneity?

The “nones” category is admittedly fuzzy, often inviting the argument that religiosity is just hidden or obscured because people aren’t doing religion in traditional ways and in traditional venues. But the bottom line is that the data show consistently and clearly that over time formal religious institutions are losing ground in our social culture. The weekly trip to a brick-and-mortar sacred space for communion with fellow believers has been replaced by personalized rituals of mimosas with girlfriends, yoga classes or informal conversations with others who no longer find relevance in the rules and creeds that molded the lives of earlier generations.

So what might be the result of this rising indifference to traditional religion? A new religious revitalization that speaks to the needs, demands and cultural sensibilities of the nones might somehow take place, but this seems unlikely to sweep up those currently being pushed out. In the face of what should be considered a crisis, or at least a significantly shrinking pool of potential members/attenders, the majority of religious institutions—from denominations to congregations—have demonstrated a remarkable inability to innovate and adapt to the challenges they are facing. In our observations, most groups continue to try to shoe-horn people into existing programs instead of actually talking to them

about what they might want in a religious community. Traditions that are inherently authoritarian and hierarchically organized may ultimately be facing an insurmountable challenge from a generation that simply doesn’t understand authority, membership, meaning and belonging in the same way.

It bears repeating, however, that most of the “nones” remain interested in developing a spiritual identity, or at least in forming communities of like-minded people. But these pursuits are taking place outside of traditional religious venues and involve activities such as meditation in which the locus of authority is the individual, who chooses how involved in the group she or he wants to be.

We propose that there will be greater polarization of religion, with a small and fervent group of religious progressives on the political left and a bigger (but still small) and even more fervent group of religious conservatives on the political right. The religious right will continue to be a political force, exercising influence that far exceeds its numbers. And religious progressives will struggle to find a foothold politically as they realize they are unable to attract those “nones” who might be sympathetic to their social message, into their staid religious institutions.

Furthermore, we predict that this volatile religious climate will sharpen existing political divides in our country. Many highly religious people will dig in deeper, and this digging in, largely through political means that amplify a steadily waning cultural influence, will ultimately foster greater religious indifference among an increasingly larger portion of the American public. If religion fueled the culture wars of the last three or four decades, the rise of the “nones”—which is, in part, a reaction to that recent history—will serve to make matters worse, in the near term. The United States is unlikely to take the secular turn of Western Europe, but the outlines of the next Great Awakening, if there is to be one, are too far over the horizon to make out just yet. ■



Mindful Togetherness

Nalika Gajaweera

December 23, 2014

RELIGIOUS NONES

Mindfulness is everywhere. From die-hard new atheists like Sam Harris to tech-gurus like Chade-Meng Tan, it is attracting a surprisingly diverse audience. Like yoga in recent decades, this derivation of a traditional Buddhist practice of meditation is finding a home in some of the most secular American cultural spaces, including university classrooms, medicine and the U.S. military. To keep abreast of these trends, major news outlets (see [here](#) and [here](#)) are scrambling to offer their take on this story.

Deeper analyses of the phenomena also abound. Many scholars, writers and journalists have shown how a traditional religious practice from the East has been adapted to respond to modern secular preoccupations with therapy, stress-management and addiction. Other commentators go still further, critically examining how this adaptation has happened. For instance, Jeff Wilson has pointed to the ways in which the origins of mindfulness in the Theravada Buddhist tradition have become both mystified and mainstreamed so that what was once a practice exclusively associated with Buddhist monastics has now been adapted to meet the mundane concerns of middle-class Americans.

Toward that end, the tradition has been mostly stripped of its supernatural and otherworldly significance. Still, the growing prevalence of mindfulness practice is not a contemporary phenomenon; rather, it's part of a longer trajectory of Buddhist modernism that has been in the making for over a century.

While much of what has been written about the contemporary mindfulness movement concerns the so-called secularization of the Buddhist path of awakening, this phenomenon can also provide us with some specific insights about spirituality in America. I suggest the best way to approach this rich cultural terrain is by doing in-depth ethnographic study of the numerous meditation-centered groups that have popped up across the country and by reframing the kinds of questions we ask.

What do contemporary adaptations of Buddhist practice tell us about the spiritual desires and yearnings of the steadily growing number of Americans who identify themselves as religiously unaffiliated, but who nonetheless are attracted to Buddhist meditation as a personal spiritual practice. How do mindfulness practitioners reconfigure elements of Buddhist practice and cultural ideas to nurture aspects of their lives that are traditionally fulfilled by the very sorts of traditional religious institutions that many of them shun?

Many of the members of the meditation groups that I have encountered through the RCCI project use the Sanskrit term "*Sangha*" to refer to their community of meditators, which includes teachers, guides and fellow students. In fact, in conversations with me they often use the terms "*Sangha*" and "community" interchangeably. At places like Against the Stream and Long Beach Meditation, teachers introduce the concept of "*Sangha*" to their members by talking about its centrality in traditional Theravada Buddhist scripture. For instance, they may refer to what is known as "taking refuge in Triple Gem"—the the Buddha (the original teacher), the Dhamma (the Buddha's teaching) and the Sangha—as an important aspect of any mindfulness practitioner's spiritual life.

This conflation of "*Sangha*" and "community," however, is a modern interpretation; it differs markedly from how traditional Theravada Buddhists have understood the word. In fact, for many traditional followers of Theravada Buddhism in countries like Myanmar, Thailand and Sri Lanka, "*Sangha*" refers exclusively to the ordained monastic community—a conception that explicitly excludes the laity. The term Sangha is therefore assigned to those monastic disciples of the Buddha who are regarded as worthy of alms and reverence, since they are believed to possess great karmic merit.

The stripping away of the monastic significance of the term Sangha in the context of American mindfulness groups is one aspect of the secularization of a sacred practice that is being adapted for the purposes of therapy, stress management and trauma. Indeed, many of those who are drawn to American versions of mindfulness practice identify themselves as atheists yet nonetheless find Buddhism appealing because they view it not as a religion, but rather as a rationalistic philosophy that aids in the process of psychological introspection.

Many mindfulness practitioners who are deeply suspicious of religion and associated notions of divine authority and supernaturalism have been quick to point out to me how their meditation practice has nothing to do with religion. In the course of doing interviews I have had to be sensitive to this issue. For example, I often opt to use the term “Sangha” in lieu of the more religiously loaded word “congregation” to ask members about their practice in the group.

Can this be viewed as yet another instance of the secularization of a Buddhist practice? Indeed, I think it can be. But at the same time, we may still ask why “taking refuge in the Sangha” retains significance for mindfulness practitioners. Why emphasize the idea of “Sangha” at all, when the therapeutic benefits of mindfulness can be obtained through solitary, committed practice?

Pablo Das, one of the teachers at Against the Stream, explained the significance of Sangha in this way: “I believe in the practices and see it as life-changing for me—but at the same time it’s about having a place to go where you feel safe and you feel seen and you feel connected and held.”

These and other explanations I have heard suggest to me that “taking refuge in the Sangha” remains important to many mindfulness practitioners because it resonates with a profound and persistent desire for community among those who identify themselves as atheist or religiously unaffiliated. Religious institutions like churches

and mosques offer their adherents a sense of connectedness, solidarity and common purpose—something that religious “Nones” often find lacking in their lives. Sangha in its desacralized form can offer a way to redeem one of the most profound and meaningful aspects of religion: togetherness.

Western adaptations of mindfulness are changing not just the context in which meditation practices are taught. They are reinterpreting beliefs about karma, community and enlightenment that can be traced back to the deepest roots of the Buddhist movement to meet the spiritual yearnings of today. ■



The “Nones” Are Alright

by Nick Street
February 10, 2015

This article originally appeared in
Al Jazeera America.

David Brooks’ Feb. 3, 2015 column in *The New York Times*, “Building better secularists,” begins with a sleight of hand. “Over the past few years,” he writes, “there has been a sharp rise in the number of people who are atheist, agnostic or without religious affiliation. A fifth of all adults and a third of the youngest adults fit into this category.”

For starters, lumping atheists and secularists into the same category as agnostics and religious “nones”—those who don’t consider themselves atheist but still check “none of the above” on religious identification surveys—makes sense only if you think that everyone who says “no thanks” to organized religion is doing so for the same reasons.

And that’s just not the case. Atheists shun religion because they don’t believe in the supernatural, regardless of whether that term is used to refer to gods, ghosts, karma or witchcraft. They point to human reason rather than divine revelation as the source for moral codes of conduct.

On the other hand, most of the “nones”—whose ranks are growing much faster than atheists, according to Pew Research Center surveys and who account for the lion’s share of the religiously unaffiliated—are leaving organized religion for very different reasons. They tend to describe themselves as put off by what they see as institutional religion’s rote ritual, polarizing politics and disengagement from the needs of those who are economically marginalized in their communities.

So when Brooks argues that “secularism has to do for nonbelievers what religion does for believers—arouse the higher emotions, exalt the passions in pursuit of moral action,” he’s actually talking about the tiny fraction of nonbelievers in the religiously unaffiliated group whose numbers have sharply risen.

More to the point, he’s also overlooking the fact that the “nones” are leaving organized religion precisely because, in their view, many religious institutions are no longer doing a good job of arousing those emotions or exalting that passion for moral action.

In my reporting on service-oriented multifaith groups in Southern California, I’ve had a chance to see these trends playing out firsthand.

“The Episcopal Church is dying,” Christian Kassoff, the founder and a co-leader of an experimental spiritual community called Thom’s, told me. “And I was screaming, ‘We need to change the church!’”

Named after Thomas, the doubting disciple of Jesus, Thom’s radically reimagines what it means to be a church. For one, it has dismantled the traditional Sunday worship service.

“We weren’t a choir,” said Kassoff. “We weren’t the Nicene Creed. We weren’t stale music or hymns with bad theology. We weren’t talk and not action. What we wanted was service first, worship second.”

For the past three years, Kassoff and the other Thom’s members have poured that energy into the group’s monthly Laundry Love event, during which they gather at a laundromat in Huntington Beach to do laundry for the homeless and the working poor.

As Kassoff put it, “For Thom’s, Laundry Love is church.” And they are not alone. In the decade since its inception in Southern California, Laundry Love has become a nationwide movement and includes 100 participating laundromats.

This growing passion for service is apparent among many of the “nones” I’ve met recently. Some of them, like 30-year-old Abraham Booe, participate in multiple service groups in order to get an altruistic fix.

“Once I got the ball rolling,” he said, “it’s kind of addicting.”

Booe, who describes himself as “spiritual but not religious,” is a service junkie. He volunteers with Share-a-Meal and Monday Night Mission, organizations that help feed the homeless

on Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles. Last year he organized Down but Not Out, a service-oriented Meetup group.

“Obviously you’re doing it because you care,” he said of the motivation behind his volunteerism. “But you’re also doing it for selfish reasons. You kind of feel good about it, and when you step away from it, it’s hard to feel that way with something else.”

This is exactly the kind of morally inflected emotional experience that Brooks apparently believes religiously unaffiliated young people will not easily find outside the doctrinal boundaries of organized religion. But as with Booe, many of them are leaving those theological confines because they feel they must seek those experiences elsewhere.

According to a Pew survey published in September, more than 70 percent of American adults say that religion is losing its influence—and most of those surveyed believe that’s an ominous development.

But the news of organized religion’s declining influence trades on the discredited idea that people who leave religious institutions become secular citizens who are no longer interested in any form of religious practice or experience—or in the expressions of compassion and altruism that most believers place at the heart of their faith.

In fact, over the past decade, as half of all adults have switched from one religious affiliation to another and 1 in 5 has left organized religion altogether, service-oriented groups have begun to flourish.

“Helping other people in a way that’s effective is very affirming, a positive emotional experience,” said Matthew Lee, a professor of sociology at the University of Akron and co-author of “The Heart of Religion: Spiritual Empowerment, Benevolence and the Experience of God’s Love.” “This is pretty close to the purpose of life itself. If an organization is effective at getting people into that flow, it’s going to grow.”

Multifaith and religiously unaffiliated service groups are arguably thriving because the ritual and social priorities of many religious institutions are driving away people such as Kassoff and Booe. This trend is apparent with Monday Night Mission, which over the past two years has grown from a handful of volunteers gathering on Mondays in downtown L.A. to a regular crew of roughly 300 spread across five nights a week. Meanwhile, membership in mainline Protestant and even evangelical congregations continues to decline.

Brooks believes that the “nones” who are abandoning those pews are part of a “mass secularization” movement that is morally rudderless. He is wrong on both counts. ■



U.S. Christianity Is Dead, Long Live U.S. Christianity— The Implications of New Religious Affiliation Data

by Richard Flory
May 20, 2015

**This post originally appeared on
Religion Dispatches.**

The cluster of comment on the recently released report on the changing American religious landscape from the Pew Research Center, we have seen two basic story lines: the U.S. is “less Christian” now than it was seven years ago—by about 8 percent, and the population of “nones” has increased, from 16 percent in 2007 to 23 percent this time around.

As bad as those numbers may sound for religious groups, things are actually even worse. The report only shows how many people consider themselves Catholic, Jewish, Baptist or “nothing in particular.” What this leaves out (which I suspect will be detailed in future reports) is what these religious identities mean as measured by attendance at services or participation in religious community.

In other words, do people who say they are Baptist or Catholic actually attend services and participate in the life of any faith community? Is religion really a part of their everyday lives, or is it just an identity marker?

We know from other research that attendance at religious services has been declining for decades, most noticeably in mainline Protestant and Catholic churches and Jewish synagogues. Now even groups like evangelicals are beginning to see their numbers thin out. Worse, younger people, who represent the future of religious groups, are attending services less often than are older generations. For example, current data on 23-28 year-olds shows that whether they claim a religious identity of not, 52 percent never attend religious services and are otherwise uninvolved in a religious congregation.

Taking into account both increased disaffiliation and decreased attendance at religious services means that the actual decline of religiosity is greater than what the Pew numbers tell us.

This may be bad or good news, depending on your perspective. Surprisingly, some religious leaders are trying to spin it in a positive direction. Southern Baptist leader Russell Moore said that the evangelical herd is essentially culling itself of “pretend Christians,” who are simply being more honest about their (lack of) beliefs. This is the same sentiment I’ve heard mainline denominational and congregational leaders express, when I’ve asked about their decline and what the future might hold.

The implication is that these churches will be stronger going forward with fewer members. I can’t decide if these leaders are delusional or just unduly optimistic about the future of their religious organizations.

On the other hand, things may not be as bad as they appear. Buried in the Pew report are responses from those who said that they have “no religion in particular” to the question, “How important is religion in your life—very important, somewhat important, not too important, or not at all important?” Forty percent responded that religion is “very” or “somewhat” important in their lives. This might come as a surprise to pundits and scholars who assume the religiously unaffiliated don’t believe in God or are somehow “secular.”

The data—including what is available through the Pew report—shows that disbelief in God is relatively stable across time and generation. Indeed the current report shows that atheists (3%) and agnostics (4%) still comprise a relatively small proportion of the American population. Thus, the increase in religious disaffiliation is not necessarily linked to an increase in disbelief *per se*.

Rather, the phenomenon of the religious “nones” represents the larger reality that increasing numbers of Americans are disenchanted with and disengaged from big institutions in general, whether political, financial, government or religious. That is, unless those institutions directly benefit them. To the extent that churches

represent large and often out-of-touch institutions that seem more interested in keeping themselves in business than in serving the needs and desires of members and (potential) attendees, people will continue to opt out of them.

From my vantage point, the current disarray in American religious identity and participation is less a story of people “losing their religion” than one of dissatisfaction with the institutional options available to them.

What does this mean for the future of American Christianity?

The decline of mainline Protestants and Catholics is unlikely to reverse. Younger generations may be marginally interested in the “smells and bells,” but they are allergic to the large-scale institutions that demand not only spiritual allegiance but also financial commitment. Crumbling bell towers require incessant appeals for money. None of those things are “religion” for these people. And now, the franchised megachurch model also is beginning to lose its appeal for younger people. They don’t want to simply reproduce a model that somebody else created.

But contrary to the doomsday headlines, all is not necessarily lost for churches. In work I am currently engaged in, my colleagues and I are finding that the corporate, megachurch-dominated models of organizing religious and spiritual activity are starting to be replaced by smaller, more locally oriented church communities, and by larger churches that attract the masses for a spiritual or musical performance, and a sense of belonging to something much larger than themselves.

Young people are looking for intimacy and personal connections, deep spiritual experiences, service to others and the opportunity to create their own community, whether religious or not.

Religion is not going anywhere anytime soon, regardless how people may identify themselves. But business as usual among existing religious institutions will not stem the losses we are seeing. ■

“When churches represent large out-of-touch institutions that seem more interested in keeping themselves in business than in serving the needs and desires of members and (potential) attendees, people will continue to opt out of them.”



Marginal Muslims: Questioning Religion in Indonesia

by Nick Street
July 6, 2015

**This post also appeared on
Huffington Post Religion.**

"If Islam is a religion of peace, why are people so violent?"

That rhetorical question brought me up short. I wasn't watching Pamela Geller's latest piece of Islamophobic stagecraft or listening to a stump speech from a UK Independence Party candidate.

I was talking to Evan, a 26-year-old student in Yogyakarta, a peaceful, Muslim-dominated university town in Indonesia.

"People who say that what extremists are doing isn't Islamic are just cherry-picking what they like," said Evan, who was raised in a "not very religious" Muslim family and now identifies himself as atheist. "I've read the whole Quran, and it's just not for me."

Evan—who asked to be identified by a pseudonym—is part of a small but growing network of atheists in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country. About 70 members of the group live near Yogyakarta, and about 1,500 more are connected through a private Facebook account based in Singapore.

That caution is understandable. Though Indonesia is officially pluralistic, belief in God is enshrined in its constitution, and at least one prominent nonbeliever has been prosecuted under the country's blasphemy law.

Meeting Evan, along with several other religiously disaffiliated young people in Yogyakarta, has been on my mind because of a recent piece in *The Guardian* about suffering and alienation among Muslim atheists in Britain. For me, the most striking feature of this angle on Muslims who question their faith is its tight focus on a handful of stories that conform to one of the dominant Western narratives about Islam—that its adherents are either the mindless purveyors

or the helpless victims of a form of violence coded into the DNA of their tradition. The most common example of this fun-house mirror distortion of Islam is the casting of violent fringe groups as mainstream Muslims.

The pervasiveness of such distortions explains how Evan—a media-saturated Millennial sitting in a café at the heart of a vibrant city in a young, relatively stable Muslim democracy—could wonder why Muslims are so violent.

A few of the young men and women I met in Yogyakarta said they had experienced ostracism and even threats as a consequence of their questioning the faith. But the common and far more compelling element threading through all of their stories was the fierce drive to examine the systems of belief that have shaped them. This intense self-scrutiny has led some of them to walk away from belief altogether, while others are reimagining their identities as Muslims in ways that are radically different from the beliefs and practices of their family members and more religiously traditional Muslim peers.

In addition to Evan, I also met Aditya—Adit, for short—while I was in Yogyakarta. Adit, 23, was raised Muslim, like his father, though his mother is Christian. His first step on the road to unbelief was questioning the concepts of heaven and hell when he was a teenager. In his father's family's version of Islam, his mother would have to convert if she wanted to avoid damnation.

"At one point I was afraid to question any further," Adit said. "I still had a problem with it, but I was afraid of going to hell!"

Like Evan, Adit has found a community of like-minded former Muslims through the atheist Facebook group. But his process of spiritual questioning has also led him to study Buddhist meditation as well as the writing of Maajid Nawaz, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Irshad Manji—figures whom he described as "Muslim reformers."

"I admire her works," Adit said of Hirsi Ali, the most controversial of the three writers he mentioned. "But she's trying to be too critical."

Adit likened the harshness of some of Hirsi Ali's writing to the work of Sam Harris and other "New Atheists."

"It's not helpful to be that arrogant," Adit said. "That primordial mentality is one of the reasons I started to dislike organized religion in general—if you're not with us, you're against us."

Then there were my favorites: 21-year-olds Silvia and Rizka. The women, both wearing the hijab, met on their university's debating team. They said that members of the team routinely challenge one another to justify their religious and political beliefs.

"There's a lot of questioning of your religion," Silvia said. "Why do you believe this or that? Why don't you take off your hijab? People challenge you to say what you think is right."

For Silvia, the intellectual rough-and-tumble of the debating team is a crucible in which her faith has been tested and strengthened. She said that her beliefs are now different from those of her conservative parents—exposure to diverse ideas, particularly about LGBT rights, has set her on a different path—but the Islam that she practices has become a more deeply integrated part of her identity.

"I realized it wasn't good to believe just to believe," she said. "You have to question in order to grow to be more than you are."

On the other hand, the critical self-examination encouraged by the culture of the debating team has led Rizka away from her faith.

"I'm not a devout anything," she said. Gesturing to her hijab, she added, "This is a hand-me-down from my parents. It's an economic calculation"—that is, as long as she is financially dependent on her family, she will do what they expect of her. "After I graduate and get a job," she added, "we'll see."

Young adult Muslims who are questioning their faith are finding a variety of ways to navigate those frequently turbulent existential waters. Some form groups, such as the Women's Mosque or Totally Radical Muslims, that seek to reclaim the liberating spirit of the faith for people who have felt marginalized in traditional Muslim communities as well as non-Muslim cultures. Others are creating new associations around a shared identity as nonbelieving former Muslims. All of these movements encourage the same kind of deep, often critical introspection that I found among the students I met in Yogyakarta. And whether overtly or covertly, they exist everywhere. No story about the edges of Islamic affiliation is complete without them. ■

Note: Individuals' names have been changed to respect their privacy



What's in a Name? Religious Nones and the American Religious Landscape

by Richard Flory
July 28, 2015

**This post originally appeared on
Religion Dispatches.**

Over the last several years the term religious “Nones” has become a major topic of discussion and analysis by those who pay attention to religious trends. Although the term dates back at least to the 1960s, based on its current usage and popularization, it would appear as though it is a completely new designation for a growing segment of the American population—those who are unaffiliated with any religious group.

What has caught everyone's attention is that there has been a significant and sustained increase in the number of people who are choosing not to identify with any religion. As reported by the Pew Research Center, in 2007, 16 percent of American adults reported no religious preference or affiliation; by 2014 this statistic had increased to almost 23 percent. And younger adults are more likely to say that they have no religion than their parents or grandparents' generations.

Many church leaders are concerned about their losses and what in their view will result in a general decline in social and personal morals. Others rationalize their losses as essentially a culling of the religious herd. Now, they say, we're down to people who really believe, instead of “cultural Christians” who don't adhere to Christian beliefs. Meanwhile, many atheists claim that the entire category is populated by fellow atheists who are somehow reluctant or afraid to publicly proclaim their disbelief.

These reactions to the increase in the number of people classified as “religious Nones” represent an assumption based on a market approach of religion and an understanding of religion as a binary reality. Just like any other business, success in the religious marketplace is the goal, and it is measured by the number of people who identify with your particular brand of religion (or irreligion as the case may be). Further, individuals are thought of as either

being religious (or spiritual) or not; there are no other options. Thus the basic gist of the majority of writing and hand-wringing about the “rise of the Nones” is that secularism is on the rise, and religion and spirituality is in retreat.

In my view, this assumption doesn't actually capture the diversity of beliefs, non-beliefs and practices within the Nones category. So, what is really going on with religious Nones?

The origins of the term shed some light on who exactly is actually included in the category. Although the category already existed, in 1968 sociologist Glenn M. Vernon published an article titled, “The Religious ‘Nones’: A Neglected Category” that brought the idea of “Nones” forward as an analytic category that religion scholars could, and should, explore. Vernon focused on the response of “none” or “none of the above” to the survey question, “What religion are you?” As it does today, his description of the term included “atheists, agnostics, those with ‘no preference,’ [and] those with no affiliation,” but it also included members of small groups that were not otherwise classified into a larger religious group. He proceeded to analyze the beliefs, experiences and affiliations of people within the Nones category. Vernon then argued that this category needed more analysis and actually suggested an alternative term for Nones (which obviously never caught on): “religious independents.”

More recently, in particular with the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), and the 2012 Pew Research Center report “Nones on the Rise,” this term has become part of the public imagination of the fate of religion in the US. (Indeed some have tracked the origins of the term Nones to the 2012 Pew report, others to ARIS researchers, rather than to its earlier origins.)

Despite all this attention, the Nones category isn't particularly helpful for understanding what is happening with religion in the U.S., unless the different groups that can be identified within the larger category are disaggregated. Moving beyond simply classifying individuals by

their religious or irreligious identity, particularly by listening to how they describe the diverse ways that they think (and act) about religion, we can identify some of the groups within the larger Nones category.

In addition to atheists, agnostics, and those who identify as “nothing in particular,” there are the “spiritual but not religious,” although they would not be found exclusively within the Nones category.

There are others who dismiss the whole idea of being “spiritual but not religious,” but who do religious/spiritual things. They occasionally attend services, pray, believe in Karma and meditate. But they don’t tend to think of these things as having any particular religious or spiritual content.

Focusing on Nones also misses those who are marginally interested in religion, rarely if ever attend services, yet claim that it has some relevance in their lives. Some Nones attend religious services on occasion, are generally open to the idea of the supernatural and believe in God or a higher power, but do not identify themselves as religious or with any particular religious tradition. As one young woman told me when I asked her whether religion had any relevance in her life, “A little bit, maybe 5 percent.”

There are still others who are generally disinterested in religion, are OK with idea of God—whether for themselves or others—but are not inclined to either identify themselves as atheists, agnostics or spiritual but not religious. There are even those who don’t believe in God but who differentiate themselves from atheists. Yes, these people exist, and in general, they distinguish themselves from what they see as the overly strident tone of atheists as well as the preoccupation of atheists to argue that God does not exist—neither practice appeals to these individuals.

Each of these have an important link to a larger perspective that we find, particularly among younger people, that might be thought of as the “It’s All Good” ethic, which tends to

stretch across the religious and non-religious alike about many life issues. As applied specifically to religion, there is an acknowledgment that others can believe—or not believe—whatever they want: “It’s all good,” at least so long as nobody gets hurt.

Since the entire category is based on non-affiliation, all those people who may identify with a particular religion but have no involvement with any religious institution are also left out. This would include people who, for example, identify as Jewish, Catholic or generally “Christian,” but who never or rarely attend services, have no spiritual practices, and are otherwise uninvolved in any religious institution, whether church, synagogue, temple, or mosque.

Finally, and perhaps most telling, people that religion scholars (like myself) designate as Nones rarely think of themselves in that way. This in itself isn’t too insightful, since most scholarly categories are at least once-removed from real life. Yet, in this case, I think it illustrates the point: how people understand the role of religion in their lives is often much different than what scholars are able to express through their measures.

Religious Nones is a more complex—and interesting—category than its name implies. Perhaps following Vernon’s 1968 suggestion to call the religiously unaffiliated “religious independents,” we might pursue a better term for this category. Yet even then we are left with a category that implies a particular theoretical and methodological approach to religion that really doesn’t fit what is going on in real world.

Rather than imposing a category that forces a multi-dimensional reality into a dichotomous measure of religious or not, or thinking about religion as a purely numbers game of what group has the most adherents, we might shift our attention to focus on how religion, values, relationships and meaning really operate in the lives of individuals and communities—religious or not. ■



How Korea's "Nones" Differ from Religiously Unaffiliated Americans

by Nick Street
February 24, 2016

Looking at a simple pie chart depicting current patterns of affiliation in Los Angeles and Seoul—the comparison case in CRCC's Religious Competition and Creative Innovation (RCCI) project—the cities seem remarkably similar.

About half of the adult population in Los Angeles identifies with some established religious institution, which makes L.A. more traditionally religious than other big coastal cities like New York City or San Francisco, but much less religious than Middle American metropolises such as Chicago, Dallas or Atlanta. (Source for pie chart.)

South Korea's adult population (which resembles Seoul's population) is also divided about evenly between "nones" and people who adhere to some conventional form of religious practice or belief. But that's where the comparison with L.A. becomes more complicated—and interesting.

Seil Oh, a research associate on the RCCI project and professor at Sogang University in Seoul, is currently studying the unaffiliated in Seoul. Oh's dissertation research at Boston College also focused on some of the trends that were becoming apparent among American "nones" in the Northeast a decade ago.

"There were already many unchurched believers," said Oh, pointing to a phenomenon that makes "nones" in the U.S. different from their counterparts in South Korea, where disaffiliated adults tend to express no interest in any kind of spiritual belief. "In America the discourses around spirituality versus religiosity have been driving efforts to explain the beliefs and behaviors of unchurched believers."

Why are "nones" in the U.S. typically more interested in non-institutional forms of spirituality like yoga, meditation and energy healing than their counterparts in South Korea? The influence of war and authoritarianism on Korean culture as well as the interplay between Protestantism and capitalism in Korea's post-war economic development are all key factors in that very complex equation.

After the end of open warfare on the Korean Peninsula in 1953, nominally democratic South Korea suffered through a series of coups and authoritarian regimes until the 1980s. During those decades of instability, the South also experienced an influx of capital from the U.S., along with waves of Protestant missionaries who dramatically increased the religiosity of a populace that had been largely indifferent to its ancient Buddhist culture and small Christian minorities before the war. But during the country's rapid industrialization all of that changed.

"Workers left rural areas for Seoul to earn money," said Oh. "Whether they had their own religion or not, they became Protestant to get support from the local church."

Then, in the pivotal year of 1987, a student leader of Seoul National University's pro-democracy movement died during a brutal interrogation at the hands of government security personnel. The student's death became the rallying point for millions of protestors around the country who compelled the ruling party to allow for the direct election of the country's president.

The heyday of South Korea Protestantism occurred between the advent of full democracy in 1987 and the turn of the millennium. Megachurches like Yoido Full Gospel flourished, and the percentage of disaffiliated adults dropped from about 90 percent at the end of the Korean War to 50 percent.

While it might seem that religious affiliation rates in Los Angeles and Seoul are heading in opposite directions, Christianity may have reached its saturation point in Korean culture. The entanglement of Protestantism and capitalism in South Korea has proved to be a poor bargain for Protestant Christianity: At start of the 2000s, stories of corruption began to taint the reputations of many Korean megachurches, including Yoido, and the appeal of the faith began to diminish for the country's millennials.

“In American culture,” Oh said, “youth don’t go to church, but they’re still spiritual. The majority of South Korean youth are not interested in spiritual life at all. They’re more interested in material life, secular life.”

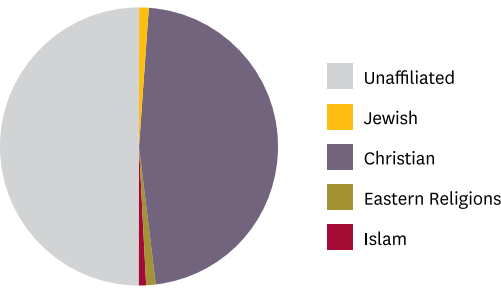
Oh sees that difference as a consequence, in part, of the deep history of civil religion in the United States—a country wrested from its indigenous inhabitants by ardent colonial religionists and founded on the notion that citizens could believe whatever they want, as long as they believed in something. Without a similar interweaving of national and religious identities, South Korea has instead made a civil religion of the free-market capitalism that defined its identity during the Cold War.

Still, even if the current cohort of South Korean “nones” lacks the impulse toward spiritual seeking that defines their counterparts in the U.S., Oh believes their children will begin to look for deeper existential meaning than the latest K-Pop tune or digital gadget can provide.

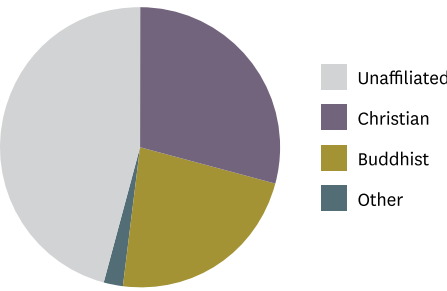
“I feel like it will be the next generation that rediscovers religion,” he said. “Should I be happier? That will be the next conundrum for Korean youth.”

Korean youth culture seems vibrant on the surface—Seoul’s abundant and affordable cafés, restaurants and clubs are filled with young people, and the quirky exuberance of K-pop influences fashion and advertising as well as music. But South Korea also has one of the highest suicide rates in the world. The crisis that prompts a turn toward religiosity may not be in Seoul’s future—it may be happening right now. ■

Religious Affiliation in Los Angeles



Religious Affiliation in South Korea



The Conversion of Freddie Roach: Boxing Without Religion

by Andrew Johnson
April 11, 2016

**This post originally appeared on
Huffington Post.**

Freddie Roach is the best known and one of the most beloved trainers in the history of boxing. He has posed for more selfies than President Obama, and A-list celebrities step out of their limousines in front of the Wild Card gym just to say hello to the 56 year-old from Dedham, Mass.

I left a message with Robert Duvall—the actor, fight fan and friend of Roach—to get a quote. Since I was asking about Freddie, Duvall called me right back.

“He is a true character and an expert at what he does,” Duvall said. “We are always attracted those people, legitimate and interesting characters, especially in my business.”

Duvall is a fan of Manny Pacquiao—Freddie’s most famous fighter—and has spent time at the Wild Card watching Freddie Roach practice his craft. “Freddie is approachable, and you can talk with him,” Duvall said. “But there is still an edge there,” he added. “And that’s okay—I have an edge too.”

When I stopped by the Wild Card last week, I spoke to Roach about Pacquiao and the upcoming fight against Timothy Bradley in Las Vegas. But mostly we talked about two conversions: Pacquiao’s born-again experience three years ago and a dramatic change in Freddie’s own life that involved no religion at all.

At his gym in Hollywood, Roach told me how a recent trip back to Dedham brought him face to face with the person he was in his teens and 20s. Roach met a friend who had known him during his years as a hardscrabble school boy, and the friend asked him, “Freddie, what happened to you?” Puzzled, Roach responded, “What are you talking about?” The friend explained, “I went to school with you. You were the meanest f—g kid in school, you were the meanest person I ever met in my life! What happened to you? Now you are a nice guy for some reason.”

As Roach recounted the story, he couldn’t help laughing at the mixed emotions he had felt when his friend clarified the reason for his initial question. “I was happy he said it, a little bit,” Roach said, “but I did want to beat him up a little bit for calling me the meanest person in the world.”

Freddie Roach was born into a fighting family, and his early life was filled with gloved and ungloved violence. Roach’s father was a professional boxer, his brothers boxed and his mother judged professional fights. Roach fought his first amateur bout at age 6. But the violence wasn’t contained to the squared circle: Roach’s father hit his wife, he hit his kids and his kids hit others.

“My answer to almost anything was to fight,” Roach told me in the basement of the Wild Card. “I have 150 amateur fights, 54 pro fights and probably 300 street fights. I fought my whole life. That is the way I was brought up.”

I asked Steve McDonough, Roach’s lifelong friend from Dedham, about 1970s Freddie. McDonough said he remembered a loyal friend with a short fuse.

He told me that after one of Roach’s first pro fights, McDonough, Roach and Roach’s girlfriend parked the car for a late dinner outside a Chinese restaurant. A car nearly clipped Roach’s girlfriend as the driver goosed the gas to snatch a parking spot, and Freddie saw red. He walked toward the parked car, and out stepped the driver—a hulking man who outweighed Freddie by 100 pounds and towered over him by seven or eight inches. The driver snickered, pushed Roach in the chest and then promptly swallowed the same overhand right hand that Roach had used to win a boxing match earlier in the evening. McDonough remembers the shocked look on the bigger man’s mangled face and his broken glasses lying 15 feet from the scene of the altercation.

Roach fought professionally at 122 pounds, a weight class dominated by Latino fighters. Since Mexican fighters were hard to find in New England, he moved to Phoenix, with his father/trainer in tow. Promoters liked Freddie because

he was a white guy who bled profusely and fought like his life was on the line. He won over fans and claimed the title in a couple of big fights, but like generations of fighters before and after him, he hung around the sport for a year or two too long. Roach's last years as a pro fighter were costly, and his body and self-esteem took a pounding.

His body shot and his bank account empty, Roach began a second career as a trainer. If his boxing career stopped short his dreams, his success as a trainer has exceeded his wildest expectations. He has trained over 30 world champions, earned seven trainer-of-the-year awards and guided the career of Pacquiao, boxing's most important pugilist since Muhammad Ali. Over the last decade, Roach has been widely acclaimed as the best boxing trainer in the world. Few people can say that they are the best in the world at what they do.

Not only has his career transformed, Freddie Roach also said he has evolved as person. Conceding his childhood friend's point, he said, "I was the meanest kid in school and I was mean when I was a fighter. Somewhere along the way things changed."

Manny Pacquiao changed his life when he converted to Evangelical Christianity in 2012. Roach has observed Pacquiao's transformation over the last four years and said Pacquiao is "a better person, a better husband and father since he became a born-again Christian. He doesn't gamble and he doesn't drink. He made a lot of good choices when he changed his religion."

The inspiration for Roach's transformation is harder to pin down.

He was baptized a Catholic like most of the kids in his predominately Irish-Catholic neighborhood, but his religious ardor dimmed quickly. Roach said he vividly remembers his last day in Catechism class, when he bolted out the classroom door after he was frightened by a nun's threat to punish him for disrupting the lesson.

"One of the nuns ran out after me," Roach said. "She told me, 'Okay, I am going to give you one more chance to come back in.' So I trusted her to do that, and as soon as I walked in the door she grabbed me by my hair, threw me down to the floor and kicked me." Roach recalls pulling himself off the floor and saying, "You know what? If you weren't a nun, I would knock you out."

Roach returned to the church's steps to sell newspapers on Sunday mornings, but he never set foot inside the building again.

Most former Catholics didn't threaten to knock out any nuns when they left the church, but Roach is part of a larger national trend away from religious affiliation, especially Catholicism. According to a 2015 Pew Forum Study, the Catholic Church is losing more members in the United States than any other denomination. For every one new Catholic in the U.S., there are six people like Freddie who decide to drop out.

The church where Freddie was almost confirmed is now barely holding on. He told me, "I used to sell 300 papers every Sunday in front of the church and right now if I went back there, I would sell 25."

Roach isn't necessarily anti-religion; he just doesn't buy it. He has the usual hang-ups with the idea of an all-powerful God, organized religion's complicity in war, poverty and other forms of human suffering. Still, in Pacquiao, Roach said he has seen how faith can change a person for the better. Though he is certain that Pacquiao's newfound faith has hurt him in the ring, he says he is a glad he now coaches a "born-again Christian" who is content to go the distance, as opposed to a dynamic knockout artist whose moral and spiritual transgressions hurt his family.

If Freddie ever had reason to dust off the prayers he learned in Catechism class, it was in 1990, when he was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease. The neurologists do not know exactly why he has the disease, but they all agree that his 54 professional fights didn't help, especially the last six.



The aphorism “There are no atheists in fox-holes” could be extended to hospital beds. Many people turn to religion to ask God to cure them of a disease or to ask for the strength to fight it. As of yet, Freddie has not. “I don’t pray,” he said. “Once I said to myself, why do I have Parkinson’s? Why the f—k did they pick me? But I let that go. I wasn’t going to pray that I don’t have it and so forth.”

On top of the Parkinson’s, Roach also has a bad back, another souvenir from the sweet science. The combination of maladies makes it hard to get out of bed in the morning, and there are times when he needs the help of a walker to move from his kitchen to his car. But something happens when he slips on the trainer’s mitts and slides through the ropes to work with his fighters. I watched him catch punches from Pacquiao for 12 three-minute rounds during an afternoon training session. I stood with my jaw dropped watching Pacquiao throw combinations with speed and precision I would have thought impossible had I not been there. Freddie caught every one.

Roach’s Parkinson’s symptoms are improving. His doctors have found a pharmaceutical cocktail that has stopped his tremors, but ask Freddie and he will tell you that boxing is his cure. He has been throwing punches since he was in kindergarten, and the 50 years of muscle memory that guides his movements in the ring is stored in a place that Parkinson’s has yet to reach.

Outside of Roach’s mother, Manny Pacquiao may know Roach better than anyone else. They have been a team for 15 years, and their relationship falls just short of father-son, but is much deeper than teacher-student. Together in training, I saw them dance a delicate and violent waltz set to the beat of roughly grunted single syllables and glances mutually understood.

Pacquiao has been the biggest beneficiary of the converted Freddie Roach. The fighter sees Roach’s inner life which is invisible to the flashes of cellphone cameras and hidden from the glare

of pay-per-view fights. In a 2013 blog post on HBO, Manny Pacquiao wrote this about his trainer: “Freddie Roach has meant everything to my professional boxing career and to me personally. I cannot overstate my feelings for him... He is a wonderful teacher. The way he lives his life and faces his affliction inspires me personally and spiritually.”

At the end of our conversation, I asked Roach what accounted for the dramatic change in his character. It turns out Freddie had been asking himself the same question. “I remember thinking about it one day,” he said, “and I kept thinking why? I don’t understand why. I just wanted to become a better person, or maybe I just grew up somewhere along the way. And that is the best answer I can give.”

With that, Freddie paused and winced. I could tell his back was killing him. The same guy who can spar 12 rounds with the some of the fastest hands on the planet can barely make it through a conversation without the physical reminders of his body-battering career. He had shifted and switched positions a dozen times as we talked and never found a spot of comfort. Finally, he put his hand on the training table next to us, tried to straighten his back once again and took another shot at answering my question.

“Close to the end of my career,” he said, “maybe a couple of hard fights humbled me a bit more than anything else.”

Boxing is a brutal sport. It crushes bones, bruises brains and sometime breaks spirits. Freddie Roach should have stopped boxing earlier than he did. His trainer told him he was finished, but fighting was all he knew, and a destructive inertia propelled him into the ring for his final half-dozen fights. But now, boxing staves off the creep of Parkinson’s and gives his life purpose. It is not my place to say whether or not it was worth it, but if Roach’s final fights against Haugen, Camacho, Tyson, Nance, Arrozal and Rivello helped to make him the man he is today, they were not wasted rounds. ■

The Changing Nature of America's Irreligious Explained

by Richard Flory
January 20, 2017

**This post originally appeared at
The Conversation.**

A recent Pew survey of the religious profile of the 115th Congress revealed that despite the increase in the number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation, members of Congress are overwhelmingly religious, with only one member identifying as having no religion.

Yet, despite who they vote for, Americans are increasingly choosing not to identify with a religious tradition. Between 2007 and 2014, this “none of the above” category has increased from 16 to 23 percent. Among young adults, one-third say that they have no religious affiliation.

Most of the public conversation about religious disaffiliation tends to emphasize the idea that with the rise of the religious “nones,” a categorization that goes back to the 1960s, America is becoming more secular and less religious.

However, in my view as a scholar of American religion, this misses the diversity within the nones.

Who really are the nones?

A Diverse Group

Nones are typically analyzed as a category of individuals who identify themselves religiously as atheists, agnostics, and having “no religious preference,” or as “nothing in particular.”

Yet a closer look at who is actually included in the category of the nones suggests a more complex picture: it is an evolving religious landscape, which currently includes a variety of people who have different relationships to religion and religious institutions.

For example, in the course of interviewing many nones for our current research project on innovative religious and irreligious groups, we are finding that, for some, religion has no place in their lives. Others may be marginally interested in religion but rarely if ever attend services. This group claims that religion still has some relevance in their lives.

We have found others who attend religious services on occasion, are generally open to the idea of the supernatural and believe in God or a higher power. However, they do not identify either as religious or following any particular religious tradition.

Still others say that they are “spiritual but not religious” and there are those who dismiss the whole idea of “spiritual but not religious,” yet maintain some religious and spiritual beliefs and practices.

We also talked to individuals who occasionally attend services, pray, believe in karma and meditate, but don’t think of these things as having any particular religious or spiritual content. In one of my interviews with a young woman, I asked whether religion had any relevance in her life, and she said, “A little bit, maybe 5 percent.”

Factors Leading to Increase

What explains this increase in religious nones? Based on my research, I see five reasons:

First, traditional authority structures, including religious ones, have been flattened through access to knowledge. As a result, everyone and no one is an authority, which reduces the need for traditional authorities of any sort. One pastor I interviewed told me that during Sunday services, her parishioners regularly fact-checked her sermons on their smart phones, rather than simply accepting what she said.

Second, fewer Americans view important social institutions -- such as religious organizations, corporations and government -- as having a positive impact in society. In the mid 1970s, 68 percent of Americans said they had “a great deal” or “a lot” of confidence in churches and other religious organizations. By 2016 this number had dropped to 41 percent.

Third, religion has a bad brand. From sex scandals across different religious traditions, to the increasing association between evangelical Christianity and the religious right, religion per se has taken a beating.

Fourth, increasing competition for people's attention from work, family responsibilities, social media and other activities means that religion loses out to more pressing commitments. Several people we have interviewed tell us that religion is just not that important for them, suggesting that involvement with a religious group is yet another social obligation rather than a time of reflection, conversation and renewal.

Finally, personal choice is a bedrock feature of American culture. Individuals choose professional affiliations, diets, club memberships and myriad other associations, with religion being one more affiliation that is "chosen" by adherents. Many young adults have been raised by parents who have encouraged them to make up their own mind about religion, resulting in their choosing "none of the above" as they think about whether they want to affiliate or be identified with any religious tradition.

In sum, the "nones" category is a fuzzy one with many maintaining some type of religious or spiritual beliefs and practice. However, the bottom line is that the data show consistently and clearly that over time, formal religious institutions are losing ground in American culture.

Why This Matters

What might be the results of this rising indifference to traditional religion in American society?

In my view, there are at least two areas in which the increase in the number of religious nones may have a significant impact in the coming years -- volunteerism, and politics.

There is a long established positive correlation between religion and volunteerism in American society. While this can be partly explained by personal religious motivations, it is also true that religious organizations have long been involved in providing important services to those in need.

As religious organizations lose members, we might expect that they will be less capable of providing the volunteers needed to make available the services they have long provided.

Some groups of nones, however, are finding different ways of doing community work, combining their desire to help others with their dislike of formal (religious) organizations. Volunteer groups unaffiliated with any religious group are doing things like feeding the homeless on LA's Skid Row and providing free laundry service to the homeless and working poor.

Their members are enthusiastic and committed, yet it is an open question whether they can create both the communities of caring and the necessary infrastructure to successfully meet the needs they are trying to address on a long term basis.

The relationship between religion and politics is an important issue, as we saw with the 2016 election. Despite the rapid increase in the number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation, nones remain a relatively small group within the American electorate.

Looking at the religious makeup of the electorate (those who actually vote in elections), the largest group is Protestants (52 percent) followed by white evangelicals (26 percent), and then Catholics (23 percent).

In contrast, nones make up only 15 percent of the electorate. Although the proportion of the electorate made up by nones has increased from nine percent in 2000 to its current 15 percent, each of the other groups have remained remarkably constant since 2000. Religious nones are also less likely to be registered to vote than, for example, white evangelicals.

In the near term this probably means that the relationship between religion and politics that has shaped our political scene since the 1980s will remain unchanged. But as the ranks of the nones continue to increase, the disconnect between our political institutions and the public they are supposed to represent may prompt some dramatic electoral realignments.

Spirit and Service

Laundry Love

by Richard Flory
June 26, 2014

Several years ago—2002 to be exact—I met an incredibly interesting young pastor named Greg Russinger. At the time, Greg was leading the Bridge Communities, an innovative church in Ventura, California. What was so striking about the Bridge Communities was that the intention to be of service to the city of Ventura was so prominent in the organization that one member commented to me that he had never been a part of a church that was focused more on taking the church to the people, rather than bringing people to the church. This encounter and many more were documented in our 2008 book, *Finding Faith: The Spiritual Quest of the Post-Boomer Generation*, in which we outlined several different ways that younger Christians were expressing and experiencing their faith.

The Bridge Communities developed many different programs that offered opportunities to “take the church to the people,” but one in particular stands out, mainly because it has now expanded to include many different faith communities across the United States. Laundry Love is a simple way to take the local congregation into the community. The fundamental premises of Laundry Love are that there are many people who find it difficult to make financial ends meet, that congregations should be actively involved in their communities and that an effective way of helping individuals in the community is to provide a place where people in difficult circumstances can get their laundry done for free. Thus volunteers from different congregations and community groups meet one night each month, pooling money, laundry soap and labor to help others in this most taken-for-granted task.

Of course doing laundry is only a part of what goes on at Laundry Love; relationships are established and lives are changed—and not usually in the ways that most middle-class, church-going people might expect. The Bridge Communities volunteers that I met in those early incarnations of Laundry Love all told me that their lives were irrevocably altered by offering their time, money and resources—and especially

by developing friendships with those they were serving.

As a part of our RCCI project, we have counted approximately 15 different Laundry Love efforts in communities across Southern California. These programs are sponsored by individual congregations, by congregations in partnership with each other and by congregations in partnership with non-religious community groups. There is a fairly wide range of faith traditions represented in the groups that are forming these Laundry Love efforts, ranging from evangelical Christian to Mainline Protestant to Muslim congregations. Thus the evolution of Laundry Love from a relatively small, localized effort sponsored by one church in Ventura to a semi-faith-based initiative that has spread from Southern California across the country is both fascinating and incredible. It also speaks to important developments in a diverse set of religious communities.

My initial interpretations of why Laundry Love has struck such a chord is that it combines an easily replicable structure—any group can visit the Laundry Love website, request a free “Laundry Love Guide Book” and purchase a \$25 “Laundry Love Start Box”—and taps into the desire of members of different faith groups to create a community in which people can find support, share similar beliefs and express their deepest spiritual commitments in tangible ways.

In *Finding Faith* we called this “expressive communalism.” In a society in which the common human touch is often missing, such groups can provide both the setting and organizational structure in which individuals can express who they are and what they are committed to. An initiative that provides a chance for people across denominations and traditions to meet in order to do laundry for others may just be the future of faith. ■

Building the Future of Religion, One Burrito at a Time: Service Groups and Religious “Nones”

by Nick Street
February 26, 2015

On a recent Thursday night, a group of about 75 volunteers for the Burrito Project commandeered the kitchen and fellowship hall at the Church of the Epiphany to make 1,000 burritos to distribute to the homeless on L.A.’s Skid Row. That undertaking was laudable enough, but the Burrito Project’s founder has a broader vision for the movement that he has sparked.

“The biggest thing is to inspire people to find the need in their community and start a project of their own,” said Alan Pinel, an architect, dance instructor and musician who organized the Burrito Project seven years ago. “I want them to become autonomous, then inspire others.”

According to Pinel, the propagation of the Burrito Project’s organizational DNA has already begun. In addition to the initiative that has taken root in Lincoln Heights, there are smaller but growing projects in Downtown L.A., Long Beach, Santa Monica, and Bakersfield.

In this way, the Church of the Epiphany—an outpost of a declining mainline Protestant denomination as well as a storied locale in L.A.’s Chicano history—has become an incubator for one of the movements that will likely shape the city’s religious future. Some of the most prominent features of this just-over-the-horizon landscape are ongoing service-oriented events like the Burrito Project that are geared to attract people from a variety of faiths along with those who profess no particular faith at all.

Pinel, for example, described himself as “traditionally Catholic,” but the mix of religious affiliations and non-affiliations among the volunteers at the event was impressively eclectic.

“I wouldn’t consider myself religious, but I do yoga once in a while,” said Frank Chen, 26, who began volunteering with fraternity brothers when he was in college.

Maria, another 20-something volunteer, also said that she doesn’t count herself as part of any religious tradition—though, “When you grow up in a Mexican family you’re technically Catholic.”

Several others were religious “nones,” but I also spoke to a member of the LDS Church, an evangelical Christian and several mainline Protestants.

The service-oriented spiritual diversity of the Burrito Project is striking, but it is by no means unique. Similar groups like Laundry Love, Monday Night Mission and Share-A-Meal have begun to flourish just as the rising number of religiously disaffiliated Millennials has started to attract attention from scholars and journalists.

“Why food?” asked Courtney Bender, a professor of religion at Columbia University. “There’s something very elemental about making and sharing food that looks like deep religious practices. Why are all these young people who are otherwise not doing anything religious making this elemental practice a central piece of their lives?”

Bender, whose book *Heaven’s Kitchen: Living Religion at God’s Love We Deliver* chronicles a service group that emerged at the height of the AIDS epidemic, sees a historical “space of critique” stretching from contemporary organizations like the Burrito Project to God’s Love We Deliver in the 1980s to Social Gospel activists in the early 20th century. She said that the groups that occupy such a space often have religious origins but are very reluctant to push those identities, both for practical reasons and as a way of critiquing the larger relationships among politics, service and spirituality.

“God’s Love was started by a woman with a strong spiritual calling,” Bender said. “But churches weren’t doing anything for people with AIDS. So in that crisis moment, they said who cares what religion you are? Come over here and let’s feed these people. Our message is the food that we give.”

Following a decade of headlines about the growth of religious “nones,” recent surveys from Pew have shown that religion is losing its influence in American public life, and that most of the American public believes this loss of influence is an ominous development.

But religious disaffiliation is a liability for civil society only if we assume that the impulse toward compassion and selfless service—the primary social goods that are usually associated with religious traditions—is lost when people leave institutional forms of religion. The dramatic growth of service groups that are attracting religious “nones” suggests that while the altruistic impulse may be specially honored in many religions, it isn’t unique to any of them, or to the phenomenon of religion itself.

Far from sounding the death knell of the spirit of civic-mindedness that marked the heyday of institutions like the Church of the Epipha-

ny, “nones”-friendly service groups are arguably charting a course for religious innovation. The primary guideposts marking this path: Determine the needs of the most marginalized residents of your city, welcome all comers in finding volunteers to meet those needs and make this commitment to open-hearted service the organizing principle of your religious community.

Service-oriented “nones” are offering the religious institutions they have abandoned a good reminder of what religion is really supposed to be about. ■



Charting the Future of Religion

by Nick Street
August 15, 2015

This article originally appeared in *Caring Magazine*.

At the start of a typical evening at Monday Night Mission, volunteers wiped down tables on a terrace outside a Burger King near Our Lady of the Angels Cathedral in downtown Los Angeles. About 50 men and women—mostly young adults—gathered around the clean tables to prepare several hundred simple meals, which they then loaded into a van, along with the folding tables they would use to create an ad hoc feeding station.

A five-minute drive brought the van and the group's small fleet of cars to a place that few Angelenos ever see: Sixth Street in the heart of L.A.'s notorious Skid Row.

The volunteers spent the next hour and a half feeding a steady stream of guests: regulars and newcomers; glassy-eyed addicts and grim-looking war veterans; a relentlessly cheerful woman with a developmental disability and a bald, stocky man who introduced himself as Telly Savalas.

"This is all about random acts of kindness," said 31-year-old Michael Haytayan, who was marking his 10th evening as a volunteer with Monday Night Mission. "I dig it." Like many of the volunteers, Haytayan said he considers himself "spiritual but not religious," and described the source of his impulse to serve as "just having a good heart."

As the number of religiously unaffiliated young people continues to grow—estimates from Pew Research Center suggest that a third of Americans under 30 are religious "nones"—service-oriented groups have begun to flourish that are designed to attract volunteers from a wide array of religious traditions, or from no tradition at all. Monday Night Mission, for example, began two years ago as a gathering of a handful of participants on Monday nights and has grown into an altruistic movement with 300 members spread over five nights a week.

The correlation between these two trends is not hard to discern. Data from Pew also highlight the fact that young adults are leaving organized religion not because they are uninterested in spirituality or collective responses to suffering but because, from their point of view, concerns about politics and doctrinal purity have eclipsed compassion for others in the life of most religious institutions.

After all the supplies were distributed and the night's crew had returned to the parking lot at Burger King, Mel Tillekeratne, the founder of Monday Night Mission, spoke about the group's origins and the philosophy behind the movement.

"It was just a matter of driving down Skid Row at night by mistake," Tillekeratne said. That wrong turn exposed him to "a different dimension" of the city he had moved to six years earlier from his native Sri Lanka.

"You see a place that's so diverse and that champions human rights," he said. "But in that same place that champions human rights, you get that exact city basically segregating a population within itself. That was kind of shocking."

Though the shock of discovering L.A.'s enormous homeless ghetto prompted the kind of response that is often associated with the missionary impulse in temple, mosque or church groups, Tillekeratne deliberately distances himself from any kind of religious association. Like many of the young adults who volunteer their service to Monday Night Mission, Tillekeratne—who's 32 and grew up Buddhist—said he's "not a fan of organized religion," particularly missionary groups who intertwine feeding Skid Row's thousands of homeless residents with proselytism.

"The key factor is you're helping a person right in front of you," he said. "It's that direct contact that's important. The religion aspect is completely removed. This is about people on an equal level meeting each other and sharing food. Simple as that."

Even volunteers who identified with a particular religious tradition—there were Catholics,



Protestants, Buddhists, a Muslim and a Baha'i among the couple of dozen people I spoke to—tended to distinguish that identity from the impulse that had prompted them to volunteer.

"I'm Christian, but I don't come here for religious reasons," said Rachel Robus, a teenage volunteer who learned about Monday Night Mission through her church. "I just want to give back to people who really need it."

The service-oriented spiritual diversity of Monday Night Mission is striking, but it is by no means unique. Similar groups like Laundry Love, The Burrito Project and Share-A-Meal have also begun to thrive just as the rising number of religiously disaffiliated Millennials has started to attract attention from scholars and journalists.

"Why food?" asked Courtney Bender, a professor of religion at Columbia University. "There's something very elemental about making and sharing food that looks like deep religious practices. Why are all these young people who are otherwise not doing anything religious, or who say they are ambivalent about organized religion, making this elemental practice a central piece of their lives?"

Bender, whose book *Heaven's Kitchen: Living Religion at God's Love We Deliver* chronicles a service group that emerged at the height of the AIDS epidemic, sees a historical "space of critique" stretching from contemporary organizations like the Burrito Project to God's Love We Deliver in the 1980s to Social Gospel activists in the early 20th century. She said that the groups that occupy such a space often have religious origins but are very reluctant to push those identities, both for practical reasons and as a way of critiquing the larger relationships among politics, service and spirituality.

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Bender's comment points toward the element of these religiously and irreligious diverse groups that is essential to understand: far from repudiating the moral and social value of selfless service, many young people are leaving pews and prayer halls precisely because they feel they must seek those values elsewhere.

Grasping that reality is indispensable for anyone interested in revitalizing religious institutions that are in decline or discerning the features that will characterize the new movements that will likely take their place.

"Young adults aren't interested in church the way it used to be," said Greg Ronning, a Lutheran pastor in Orange County whose church members regularly participate in a Laundry Love event in Huntington Beach, Calif. "For us the key was finding a community engagement piece. The diversity in the volunteers is important too. You don't have doctrinal debates. You just do [service for others]."

On a recent Thursday night, a group of about 75 volunteers for the Burrito Project commandeered the kitchen and fellowship hall at the Church of the Epiphany to make 1,000 burritos to distribute to the homeless on L.A.'s Skid Row. That undertaking was laudable enough, but the Burrito Project's founder has a broader vision for the movement that he has sparked.

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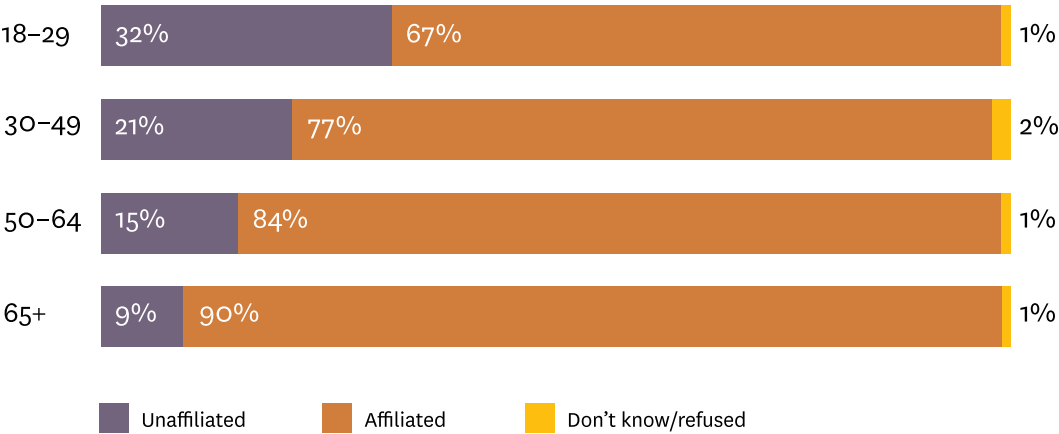
Following a decade of headlines about the growth of religious “nones,” some of the most recent surveys from Pew have shown that religion is losing its influence in American public life, and that most Americans believe this loss of influence is an ominous development.

But religious disaffiliation is a liability for civil society only if we assume that the impulse toward compassion and selfless service is lost when people leave institutional forms of religion. The dramatic growth of service groups that are attracting religious “nones” suggests that while the altruistic impulse may be specially honored in many religions, it isn’t unique to any of them—or, for that matter, to institutionalized forms of religion.

Thus, far from sounding the death knell of the spirit of civic-mindedness that marked the heyday of institutions like the Church of the Epiphany, “nones”-friendly service groups are arguably charting a course for religious innovation. The primary guideposts marking this path: determine the needs of the most marginalized residents of your city, welcome all comers in finding volunteers to meet those needs and make this commitment to open-hearted service the organizing principle of your religious community.

Service-oriented “nones” are offering the religious institutions they have abandoned a timely reminder of what religion is supposed to be about. ■

Religious Affiliation by Age



SOURCE: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press

Place Matters

The Jewish Religious Scene in Southern California

by Bruce Phillips
January 8, 2013

**This post originally appeared in
The Jewish Journal.**

As I wrote upon my return from the annual meeting of the Association for Jewish Studies, I was embarrassed that Los Angeles was conspicuously absent from presentations on Jewish community studies because our last study is close to 16 years old. My colleagues in Jewish demography are astonished that LA does not even have a survey on the radar.

There are hints of our Jewish community in others' data. I have been working with the Pew Religious Landscape Survey data from 2007 as a part of a project I'm working on with the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California. Because this was a survey on religion, only Jews by religion were interviewed. Jews who identified as secular or with some other religion (e.g. Buddhism) could not be identified. Nonetheless, the data are instructive.

I broke out Los Angeles County separately to how we look. The most popular Jewish denomination was Reform at 40.8%, followed by Conservative at 33.3%. The third most popular denomination was no denomination at all ("just Jewish") at 14.8%.

Again, this refers only to respondents who identified their religion as Judaism. The Reconstructionist movement is more popular in Los Angeles County than anywhere else in the country: 6.7 percent of LA County Jews identified themselves this way as compared with only 1.5% nationwide. Only 2.1% identified themselves as Orthodox in LA, as compared with 14.4% in the Northeast. Another 2.1% identified themselves as "traditional." That might mean "almost Orthodox" or it could also be immigrants who don't see themselves fitting into the established denominations. If I add Ventura County, Orange County, and San Diego County to the mix, the pattern is pretty much the same.

Southern California Jews (again, that's Jews by religion) are more racially diverse than Jews anywhere else in the country. Only 83% of Southern California Jews described themselves as Anglo (i.e. non-Hispanic white). The largest group of non-Anglo Jews was "other/mixed race" at 7.7%, followed by Hispanics at 7.1%. When we say that Southern California Jews look different than Jews elsewhere, that's not just a figure of speech. We actually look different. ■



Finding the Future in Los Feliz

by Nick Street

May 15, 2014

PLACE MATTERS

During his comments at a recent Getty House event to mark the National Day of Prayer, Mayor Eric Garcetti referred to L.A.'s current cultural moment as "this hinge of history."

Civic boosterism? Political hyperbole? What, exactly, did he mean?

"There isn't a speech that I give now as the mayor of this city where I don't talk about the fact that this is the most diverse collection of human beings in human history," Garcetti said. "This is the pinnacle. We've had empires that have brought together people from all over what was then the known world, but Los Angeles actually brings together the entire world."

True enough. But how do you get from the mere fact of Southern California's singular diversity to the conclusion that the 20 million people in this sprawling, fractious megalopolis are living on the cusp of—again, what exactly?

One way—arguably, the best way—to answer that question is to look at how religious movements behave in this vast multicultural hot-house. Specifically, how do given groups relate to other spiritual groups, local civic institutions and broader trends in the zeitgeist? And how does that interplay between religion and other dimensions of culture shape religious communities as well as the larger social environment in L.A. and beyond?

Those are some of the questions behind CRCC's Religious Competition and Creative Innovation (RCCI) project. One strategy we're pursuing is to look at ways that increasing disaffiliation—the famously growing ranks of the "Nones"—along with hyper-local context and internal group dynamics can spark new forms of religious organization, identity and expression.

What does this investigation look like on the ground?

Take the roughly triangular region of Los Feliz, Silver Lake and East Hollywood captured on this map. Within an area of about one square mile, you can find expressions of mainline Protestantism, reverse-mission immigrant evangelism, Scientology, Native American spirituality,

Indian guru lineage, Sikhism, Rationalism, LGBT Protestantism, Mormonism, Judaism, Buddhism—and a handful of loosely organized Meet-up groups that have formed around religious identities that have yet to coalesce into any kind of "ism."

Within this area—and in similarly dense sample areas in other parts of the Southland—we'll survey key organizational actors to understand how their congregations (or whatever they may be called) operate internally, relate to institutions in the surrounding community and interact with other religious (or irreligious) movements. The purpose of this data gathering will be to pinpoint groups that are responding to their astonishingly diverse environment by creating novel organizational structures, communal activities, communication strategies or interpretive traditions.

Because in this most global of cities in the era of globalization, it is precisely these innovations that will shape next-generation religious movements in other parts of the world.

The future may belong to hybrid groups in Los Feliz such as Against the Stream and Self-Realization Fellowship—both of which, like twentieth-century Pentecostalism, grew from spiritual seeds that blew into Southern California from elsewhere and sprouted here in distinctly new ways. But in any case, our prognostications will grow clearer as the RCCI project gathers steam in the coming months. So stay tuned—we hope to have some definite things to say about which way that hinge of history is likely to swing. ■

From Margin to Center: A Queer (and Timely) Theological Mix in Los Feliz

by Nick Street
June 10, 2014

Founders MCC, the Los Angeles-based mother church of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, is literally putting new flesh on some of the Mainline Protestant establishment's old bones.

Three years ago MCCLA bought a complex of buildings that had previously housed the Mt. Hollywood Congregational Church and began a \$1 million renovation project. The undertaking isn't so much an investment in the future as a reflection of what MCCLA is already doing in the here-and-now. Even as workers install central air conditioning, a commercial-grade kitchen and an elevator to make the 94-year-old Spanish Colonial chapel ADA-compliant, the church plays host each week to three Sunday services, about 20 recovery group meetings, a preschool program with a current enrollment of 25 and a Tagalog Bible study class that caters to residents from nearby Filipinotown.

Not bad for a 300-member congregation colloquially known as the Gay Church.

The Rev. Dr. Neil Cazares-Thomas,* MCCLA's senior pastor, abides that moniker with good humor. But he is quick to point out that while the Metropolitan Community Church shares some common roots with feminist, black and other identity-based theologies that emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s, his organization today is casting a much wider net.

"Queer theology is a strategy of radical inclusion," he said. "That means upsetting the dominant cultural myths and challenging the loudest voices in the public square. Basically we're exploring how we can all be queer together."

In practice, this notion of radical inclusion has produced a religious culture that accommodates a striking degree of liturgical and theological hybridity. MCCLA deploys Catholic folk iconography along with a range of Protestant worship styles—Thomas wears vestments at MCCLA's comparatively staid 9am Sunday service and a suit and tie at the Pentecostal-inflected 11am service. He also officiates Mass at the afternoon Spanish-language service.

While spiritual bricolage isn't unusual for "seeker-oriented" churches, Cazares-Thomas sees his community's deliberate and dramatically wide-ranging syncretism as a direct response to broader shifts in the American religious landscape.

"As evangelical fundamentalism is dying in this country," he said, "we have an opportunity to move past dogmatic binaries."

This active search for barriers to breach has also led to interreligious collaborations between MCCLA and a number of faith-based groups that have historically been wary of or even hostile toward queer people. Cazares-Thomas, who was born into a Mormon family, is partnering with a Latter Day Saints mission in Los Feliz to establish a food pantry and a social service program for LGBT youth. And along with nearby Holy Spirit Silver Lake, MCCLA participates in Laundry Love, an outreach program to impoverished families that has engaged congregations from across the denominational spectrum.

MCCLA is in many ways a "mini" mega-church: By providing a wide range of worship, community service and personal growth opportunities for people whose needs are often not met elsewhere, the organization draws congregants not just from Los Feliz but from all over Southern California. Still, its innovations—that is, its relevance to our concerns in the RCCI project—extend beyond a reiteration of the market-driven growth strategies of places like Saddleback Church and the Dream Center.

"We'll borrow from anybody," Cazares-Thomas said in response to a question about the surprising diversity of MCCLA's religious culture. This open-mindedness is in many ways the organizational embodiment of the kind of individualistic spirituality that has become the hallmark of our "spiritual-but-not-religious" age. If the theology of MCCLA is queer in several senses of that word, it's also remarkably prescient.

The Gay Church has already begun to attract a few disaffected sheep from the flocks of “straight” churches—in fact, about half the children in MCCLA’s day care program are from non-gay families in the neighborhood. Those radically inclusive developments suit Thomas just fine. ■

* Cazares-Thomas now pastors Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, TX.



In Mellow L.A. and Suave Rio, Religious Movements are Similar (but Different)

by Andrew Johnson
June 24, 2014

When I walked by the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum on USC's campus this week I thought of Rio de Janeiro. The Coliseum stands as a symbol of both the 1932 and 1984 Olympics—the latter event still widely regarded as the most successful Olympic Games ever. The stadium reminded me of Rio because when I left that city two years ago, the Maracana Stadium was in the middle of a massive and controversial overhaul in anticipation of this summer's World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics. Like the Coliseum, the Maracana will certainly have symbolic value in 20 years that is tied to the success or failure of the 2016 Olympics.

But Los Angeles and Rio are linked by more than Olympic history. Each city has a metropolitan population of over 10 million, they are situated on world-famous beaches and both Rio and L.A. are the centers of their respective country's entertainment industries. Neither is a center of international finance or national politics, so they don't have the same intensities as New York or Sao Paulo, Washington D.C. or Brasilia.

Paying close attention to this kind of context is on my mind because the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture, where I'm a research associate, recently started RCCI, a three-year project to study innovation and change in religious organizations in Los Angeles. One of project's guiding research questions asks what impact geographic location has on the city's religious groups. Specifically, how does the urban ecology of Los Angeles foster innovative change in religious communities?

Though Los Angeles and Rio de Janeiro are similar in many ways, the thesis for the project is that every religious group is to some degree an "open system" that both impacts its surrounding community and simultaneously reflects elements of its social context. So despite the cities' similarities, studying religious congregations in Rio de Janeiro is fundamentally different from studying religious groups in Los Angeles. In other words, place matters.

For example, Los Angeles has one of the most diverse and international populations of any city in the world. More than one third of the people living in L.A. were born in a different country, and there are over 100 languages spoken in the public school system. By comparison, even though Rio receives millions of tourists each year, only about one percent of the city was born outside of Brazil. Thus one question driving the RCCI research in Los Angeles is, How do religious groups in a heterogeneous cultural environment like Los Angeles change in innovative ways?

Los Angeles is not only one of the most culturally diverse cities on the planet but also one of the most religiously diverse. The Pentecostal movement began less than five miles from USC's campus, and though Catholicism is the most widely practiced faith in the city, L.A. is home to large and thriving Jewish synagogues, Hindu and Buddhist temples and a rapidly growing Muslim population. The LDS, Baha'i and Sikhs are active in the city, as are a number of New Religious Movements like the Self Realization Fellowship and the Science of Mind. Religious innovation and change in Los Angeles will likely look very different than in a city like Rio de Janeiro, where over 90 percent of the population identifies as either Catholic or Protestant.

The two cities have similar-yet-different recent histories as well. The Civil Unrest, or the "L.A. Riots," in 1992 dramatically changed the character of Los Angeles and gave religious groups a unique platform to address an immediate, large-scale crisis. In fact, both CRCC and the allied Cecil Murray Center for Civic Engagement trace their roots to the events in 1992.

Right now, Rio de Janeiro is in the middle of its own crisis, as unprecedented public protests and frustration with local and national government push to the front of Brazil's national discourse. But it is still unclear how the protests surrounding the World Cup and the upcoming Olympics will shape the city, and it remains to be seen how religious groups will respond to Rio's civil unrest.

So what does innovation mean to religious groups in unique geographic and social contexts? Does religious and cultural diversity fuel innovation in Los Angeles, while in Rio de Janeiro religious groups innovate in response to acute poverty and social injustice? There are no simple answers to these questions, and there are likely a number of ways to formulate a response. As the RCCI project develops, researchers at CRCC will develop conceptual frameworks to respond to questions like this and to other lines of inquiry related to the study of innovation, religion and place. ■



TOP: PAUL SABLEMAN / FLICKR; LOWER MIDDLE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Where They Make Manna

by Andrew Johnson
July 15, 2014

When Pastor Ed Carey arrived at Hope International Bible Fellowship (Hope IBF) in 1994, the situation was grim. The once-thriving congregation was down to 30 people and thinking of closing its doors. The church building was starting to show its age after nearly 75 years of service, the congregation's debt seemed insurmountable and the surrounding neighborhood was developing a reputation as a place of poverty, crime and vice.

Many members had already spoken with their feet—almost all of them had left the church—but Pastor Carey sensed something at Hope IBF that others did not. He saw life in the congregation and the church building, and he saw life in the surrounding East Hollywood neighborhood. Pastor Carey decided to stay, but his plan to change the trajectory of Hope IBF did not involve trying to convince people to drive in from the suburbs or recruiting people who “had it all together” to join the church. Instead, less than a year after he arrived Pastor Carey started a recovery program at Hope IBF and invited people struggling with addiction to join the church.

A recovering alcoholic himself, Pastor Carey didn't view people with drug and alcohol problems as liabilities who would drain the church's meager resources; rather, he saw them as spiritual assets who could be “repurposed” to help rebuild the church. In other words, he could see the life in them too.

We saw the fruits of Pastor Carey's work when we visited Hope IBF to take a tour of the Manna Room, the church's food ministry. Ben Falcioni, the director of the Manna Room, showed us the former Sunday school space at Hope IBF that had been converted into a refrigerated food-storage area to hold the bulk of the 4,000 pounds of donated food collected each day. The Manna Room partners with local Trader Joe's and Whole Foods stores to collect food that is about to expire or that is no longer useful to the stores. Ten percent of the food is used for the two daily meals that are prepared in Hope IBF's kitchen and served to locals who could use a hot meal. The other 90 percent of the food is distributed to

small, community-based ministries and charities in Los Angeles. Using food that others have deemed useless, the Manna Room works with others to make 400,000 meals a year for people in need.

“I tell the guys in our recovery program that they are like these vegetables,” Falcioni said. “They come here bruised, battered and have been thrown out as trash. But there is still life in them.”

The Manna Room is a labor-intensive operation that requires dozens of people to drive the delivery trucks, sort the food, prepare the meals, maintain community relationships and clean the kitchen at the end of each day. Falcioni is the only paid staff member, so the lifeblood of the operation are the volunteers.

Most and sometimes all of the Manna Room's volunteers are currently participating in IBF's recovery program. Many of them show up at the church during some of the lowest points of their lives—in fact, some are close to their own expiration dates. They have hurt themselves as well as the people closest to them, and arrive needing serious help. When they reach Hope IBF's doorstep, helping others may be the last thing on their minds, but serving others who are also in need is an integral part of the recovery program.

Participants live in Hope IBF-owned housing and wake up at 4am to pick up the food, salvage what is edible, then clean and prepare it to be served for the free morning and afternoon meals. Their service to the church is as essential to their recovery as the 12-steps themselves.

On any given weekday, there are dozens of people working in the kitchen and dozens more eating a free meal in the church's ad hoc dining room. During the weekend, hundreds more people enter the building as members of the five separate congregations that worship at Hope's sanctuary. Latino, Armenian and Roma congregations, along with two groups aimed at the twenty-something hipsters now moving into the neighborhood, rent the sanctuary to hold

worship services. These six very diverse congregations hold periodic barbeques together, and some members of the other groups participate as volunteers at the Manna Room.

The monthly rents from these congregations, along with additional support from mission teams from around the country, pay for things like the \$40,000 in gas that IBF's delivery trucks consumer each year. Seeing the bustling daily activity at IBF in 2014 makes it hard to imagine that 20 years ago, the church was struggling just to keep its doors open.

In some ways, Hope IBF looks a lot like the Jesus People Movement of the 1960's. Larry Eskridge, a historian at Wheaton College, argues that, "Far from being an ephemeral blip or a religious fad, the Jesus People Movement was a major episode in American religious history." Like the Jesus People, Hope IBF embodies the informality of the early church, embraces a counter-cultural identity and attracts people who are drawn to a faith practice that they perceive as authentic. But even though it shares the spirit of an American movement from an earlier era, Hope IBF is a unique and innovative place whose mission and programming have been shaped foremost by the vision of Pastor Carey.

Hope IBF is a reflection of its pastor because the church and its ministries see the life—not the imperfections—in the surrounding neighborhood, the church building, the food donated daily and the people who pass through its doors. ■

“Hope IBF embodies the informality of the early church and embraces a counter-cultural identity that attracts people who are drawn to a faith practice that they perceive as authentic.”

The Burbs Are Alright: Religion, Sprawl and L.A.'s Urban Logic

by Richard Flory
August 6, 2014

As a part of our Religious Competition and Creative Innovation project, our research team meets once each month for “idea lunches” during which we have freewheeling discussions about what we’re seeing in the field. Last week, our theme was “theorizing L.A.,” and our conversation focused on readings from the so-called Los Angeles School of urban theory, as well as angles on religion in Southern California, all to help us think about how religion operates within particular geographic and social locations.

The primary difficulty of “theorizing L.A.” or any large urban area is that one model just never seems sufficient to explain the social and cultural reality that exists outside of academic discussions. Indeed, one of my criticisms of the Los Angeles School is that it is just so much armchair theorizing (“Southern California is like Disneyland!”), but without in-depth, empirical observation of what is really happening on the ground.

As I was driving home after our discussion, a large traffic jam (even by L.A. standards) prompted me to devise an alternative route to cover my 45-mile commute home. I had no good choices, so I decided to head across six miles of surface streets to connect to another freeway and thus avoid the huge traffic jam.

As I was driving, I had plenty of time to think about our earlier discussion of Los Angeles, and I decided to turn my attempt to avoid freeway backup into a field exercise and drive all the way home on surface streets to see whatever I could see along the way. I ended up driving through parts of 14 different cities as I crept across a swath of Southern California’s famous sprawl. My revised commute took me just over two hours.

What I observed in this vast yet familiar landscape contradicted much of what the L.A. School theorists argue. Of course their observations about unchecked growth, congestion, economic inequalities and the like are fairly apt, yet other elements of their argument just didn’t apply to the worlds I passed through. L.A. urban theorists like to distinguish themselves from the so-called Chicago School of urban theory (which

itself has limitations), particularly in terms of how urban areas are governed. In fact, the general consensus is that “L.A.,” by which they mean the entire five-county Southern California region, is “ungovernable.”

True enough, Southern California lacks any sort of central governing structure, but is instead an enormous patchwork of dozens of distinct cities spread across five counties, one of which (Los Angeles) is the most populous county in the U.S., and another (San Bernardino) is the largest. Each city and county has its own governing structure, all of which means that there’s little hope for regional consensus on such matters as mass transit, environmental equity and the like.

Yet as I drove through this cross-section of “ungovernable” Greater L.A., I saw something other than chaotic urban sprawl. Based on what I know of the history of these cities, what I observed was an incredible range of social change and civic development. For example, as I drove through Compton, I did not see the city I knew when I was growing up—the Compton immortalized by “Boyz ‘n the Hood.” Instead I observed a place that, despite many problems, looks to be working hard to create an environment where families, communities and businesses can thrive.

Likewise with other cities I saw on my journey. Paramount, for example, which also used to have a reputation as a pretty tough town. As I drove through, I suddenly realized I was at the intersection where my high school used to be, but I hadn’t even recognized it. Instead of rundown businesses and apartment complexes where knifings and fistfights took place on a daily basis, there were new condo developments, businesses and a nice greenbelt with large trees running down the middle of the road. I could offer additional examples of positive development, but the point is this: Local civic leaders may not see eye-to-eye with authorities at the county, state or federal level, but for the most part they appear to be doing what local citizens elect them to do.

This kind of localism is also apparent in expressions of religion in Southern California. The obvious examples are the many revivalisms and new religious movements that have been birthed in Los Angeles. Less obvious, unless you happen to be on an extended drive through different neighborhoods on surface streets, is how religion is emplaced within these communities. In my very informal survey, certain patterns emerged that might help us to think about the relationship between geographic place, political authority and how these relate to the ways religion perceived and enacted.

In cities that are closer to Los Angeles, religious buildings (such as churches) are situated more obviously on the main thoroughfares and are thus a more visible presence in these communities. These buildings tend to have little space surrounding them (whether parking lots or green space), and “storefront churches” are much more likely to spring up in these communities than in cities farther from L.A.’s old urban core. On the other hand, religious buildings tend to blend into constructed landscapes in more suburban environments, and they are less obviously religious than their counterparts in cities closer to LA.

At least in part, these differences reflect how and when these cities were established, and how they have been governed over time. In other words, local authorities write and enforce building codes and zoning laws that establish limits and create opportunities that determine how the built environment takes shape. This in turn influences perceptions of religion in different communities, as well as the relative ability of religious groups to be more-or-less free to do or act as they see fit.

Thus, in thinking about religion within specific contexts, we need to consider how the built environment—which is in large part an expression of the priorities of local authorities and the building codes and zoning strategies they impose—situates religion in the public places of different communities. Furthermore, these factors relate to how religious groups interact not only with each other but also how they enter the public sphere. In my mind, Southern California’s sprawl has its own local logic, which can help us to understand why L.A. is the way it is and why religion, at least in part, takes on the characteristics of its surroundings. ■



Iceberg Lettuce vs. Arugula: Religion and Gentrification in Los Feliz

by Andrew Johnson
August 18, 2014

Last week I took a walk on the gentrifying edge of Los Feliz with the pastor of a local church that mainly ministers to the down-and-out. We talked about the urban landscape around us as we passed through city blocks in the midst of a transition—new people are moving in, others are moving out.

We stopped in front of a busy restaurant and watched well-dressed, well-heeled people enjoying lunch on an outdoor patio. Such a scene is hardly unusual in Los Angeles, but it was new for this neighborhood. The upscale eatery served as a timely example of the change the pastor was explaining to me. Ten years ago, “people were scared to come here,” he said. “Now on Sunday mornings they line up all the way down the block waiting in line for brunch.”

There was no sarcasm or animosity in his voice, but the stylish restaurant—offering “organic, local and small-farm produce” and boasting over 1,000 reviews on Yelp—served as visible proof of an evolution in the neighborhood that the pastor could feel almost day-by-day. As we stepped away from the restaurant he asked a question that will be important to our research for the Religious Competition and Creative Innovation (RCCI) project: “I wonder if our congregation will gentrify too?”

Los Feliz and adjacent Silver Lake combine to form one of the “coolest” areas in Los Angeles, which puts this pair of neighborhoods high in the running for some of the coolest places on earth. How do you measure cool? In 2012, *Forbes* Magazine analyzed neighborhood data such as walkability scores, the prevalence of coffee shops, the percentage of residents who work in artistic occupations and access to food trucks. Based on the results of their number crunching they named Silver Lake as the “Best Hipster Neighborhood” in the United States.

The writers at *Forbes* are not the only ones measuring cool. The Los Angeles County real estate website PropertyShark.com used a different data set to crown Los Feliz as L.A.’s “Most Rapidly-Gentrifying Neighborhood.” The

researchers compiled neighborhood-specific data and created a ratio by comparing median home prices to household income as an indicator of gentrification. As the map above shows, Los Feliz—situated between the Hollywood and Silver Lake reservoirs—is literally red-hot.

Whether it is called urban renewal or gentrification, the process is not unique to Los Angeles. All across American cities, artists, recent college grads, yuppies and empty-nesters—largely but not exclusively white—are moving into strategically situated urban neighborhoods. In these urban spaces, locally sourced restaurants and Third Wave coffee shops inevitably begin to replace less glamorous establishments. Meanwhile, housing renovations and rising rents spur the departure of the previous residents, who are usually non-white and often immigrants. The specifics change from city to city, but the broader pattern has become predictable. What is less predictable is what happens to the religious groups located in these transforming neighborhoods.

Centro Cristiano Pentecostal is only a few blocks from vintage clothing stores and bars offering “hand-crafted” cocktails on Vermont Avenue in the heart of Los Feliz. But the Spanish-speaking church, where women wear calf-length dresses and the men tuck in their shirts, is still thriving even though the neighborhood looks a lot different now than it did in 1995, when the congregation bought the building. The three weekend services followed by potluck meals served in the parking lot draw over 400 worshippers. Combined with a Thursday youth service and two mid-week prayer services, this means that Centro Cristiano Pentecostal is a place of constant activity. Fewer members walk or take the bus to church than in the past, and many drive an hour each way to participate. But despite increasing commute times and the transformation of the neighborhood, the church shows no signs of slowing down and has no plans to relocate.

One of the questions we are pursuing in the RCCI project mirrors the question asked by the Los Feliz pastor last week when we stood in front of the restaurant: Do congregations gentrify? The pastor didn't pose his question rhetorically, and we are taking that line of inquiry seriously as we conduct the fieldwork for this project.

Specifically, we're not assuming that religious groups will follow the same gentrification patterns as the neighborhoods where they are located. Like Centro Cristiano Pentecostal, many congregations own their buildings and are therefore not impacted by rising rents or property taxes in the same way as other local residents. Members have emotional and historical attachments to their churches, which may keep these institutions alive even as restaurants around them update their menus, owners of residential buildings convert apartments into lofts and former corner stores become yoga studios.

On the other hand, longer commute times may decrease members' ability to participate in church activities with the frequency they once did. That means that, over time, churches closer to home may become increasingly attractive to working families navigating very busy weeks.

Can an iceberg lettuce congregation survive in an arugula neighborhood? Issues of race, class, immigration, social change and, of course, religion converge in that question, so we'll be gathering and crunching our own data to try to answer it. ■

“Members have emotional and historical attachments to their churches, which may keep these institutions alive even as restaurants around them update their menus, owners of residential buildings convert apartments into lofts and former corner stores become yoga studios.”

Mile of Miracles: A Microcosm of L.A.'s Religious Diversity

by Brie Loskota
January 9, 2015

The processes of spiritual seeking, discovering and creating are constantly shaping and reshaping the religious landscape of Los Angeles. Far from being a godless metropolis, L.A. is one of the most religiously diverse and pluralistic cities in the world. Just about every religion and denomination that exists can be found in L.A., and a number of fascinating (and even controversial) religious movements began here.

For example, within a mile of MacArthur Park, you can find dozens of religion-infused sites across a wide spectrum of belief, from Korean Pentecostal storefront churches, to botanicas selling products that blend folk and Catholic beliefs, and several Vietnamese Buddhist temples. What's more, 53 percent of L.A. County's population regularly participates in some form of organized congregational life, much higher than San Francisco's 35 percent and New York's 44 percent. All told, there are almost 10,000 congregations in the County, and that number continues to grow.

Religion has always coursed through the veins of the City of Angels. Tongva villages and ceremonial sites thrived near steady water sources for centuries, and the area's earliest European settlements were rooted in religion, with the founding of the San Gabriel Mission by Franciscan monks in 1771. And Angelenos have been remarkably innovative. American Pentecostalism was born L.A. in 1906 in a small interracial church on Azusa Street in what is now Little Tokyo. Paramahansa Yogananda founded the Self-Realization Fellowship here in 1920 and taught Kriya Yoga long before yoga pants became the uniform of suburban leisure.

This rich religious landscape is in constant motion, mixing some spiritual groups and creating layers of history as other groups rise or fall, move up or move on, and move in or move out of buildings and neighborhoods. Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel was a Jewish congregation founded 100 years ago on what is now Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. Currently it is Greater New Vision Missionary Baptist Church, an African-American

church surrounded by an increasingly Latino neighborhood. In the case of the Pico-Union Project, a former synagogue built in 1909 was eventually acquired by the Welsh Presbyterian Church, only to be bought once again by a Jewish organization and rehabbed as a center for Jewish spirituality, interfaith engagement and the arts, while also hosting two different Asian church groups each week.

Walk less than two miles along Wilshire Boulevard in Mid City and you'll pass ornate European-inspired churches that are nearly a century old along with commercial properties in strip malls that have been reshaped into sacred religious spaces. Duck down the side streets to find old homes converted into houses of prayer, meditation and worship. In this area, a non-denominational evangelical church recently bought an historic building that once housed a mainline Christian congregation, and a former insurance company is now a mosque with a Buddhist temple just behind it. The neighborhood is also home to one of the world's largest pipe organs (at the First Congregationalist Church) as well as a Catholic Priest who rides a Harley.

And all of these movements and organizations flourish side-by-side in a degree of harmony that is rare or even unheard-of in other parts of the world. The occasional crisis, like the 1992 civil unrest, has prompted diverse groups to extend the olive branch and build bridges, even when these relationships are challenging.

Religious tensions, like political rows, can stretch neighborly goodwill pretty thin. So too can fights over zoning and traffic. After all in L.A. the Holy Grail might be spiritual enlightenment, or just a primo parking space. ■

With Religious Affiliation on the Decline, What Should Happen to Hallowed Buildings?

by Megan Sweas
July 16, 2015

**This post originally appeared on
Washington Post's Acts of Faith blog.**

Katy Perry wants to live in a convent.

No, she is not among the young women who want to become a Catholic sister (and yes, they do exist). She has negotiated with the Los Angeles Archdiocese to buy a former convent in Los Feliz, one of the trendiest neighborhoods in L.A.

The real estate deal attracted national media attention recently because two nuns are blocking Perry's purchase, saying they've already sold the property to another buyer.

But beyond the celebrity factor, this story highlights an important question about the future of religion: What should happen to hallowed buildings left empty not only by the decline of nuns but also by the rise of religious "nones," those who don't identify with religion?

The L.A. legal battle is ultimately about the control of assets. The sisters want to make sure they manage the proceeds of the sale after buying the property from a benefactor in 1970.

As Heidi Schlumpf points out at CNN, the threat of the "church hierarchy, mainly bishops, trying to get their hands on the vast property owned by women's religious orders in the United States" is all too real coming off a Vatican investigation of U.S. women's orders that included requests for financial information.

Catholic sisters take vows of poverty, but institutionally, they can be rich in real estate, schools or hospital systems. With fewer younger sisters to support the old, congregations of women religious sometimes cash in those assets.

Similar fights over property and the proceeds of sales take place when denominations close declining churches.

It's not unusual for convents and churches to be sold to the highest bidder, typically a developer. Holy Trinity Church in Boston is one of the most recent to go, with architects revealing plans for a glass and steel structure that would rise out of the remaining church building.

"A church that served as base of operations for a day program for homeless adults and at-risk youth will now be marketed as housing for the wealthy," a *Boston Globe* columnist wrote in reaction to the plan, capturing many people's uneasiness with such a transition.

I have previously written on a congregation of women religious that had sold their former motherhouse to Loyola University of Chicago. Catholic sisters know that their numbers are shrinking, and they want their spirit to live on. "We were happy that a religious community was taking it and a community that was dedicated to education, because that's exactly what we were dedicated to," a sister told the *Chicago Reader*.

But Loyola turned around and sold the property to a developer. The village council intervened, and the convent survived as senior housing, with 12 "affordable" units. But in a building where one unit sold for \$1.7 million, affordable meant \$200,000 (before the housing crash).

LA Times columnist Steve Lopez, who broke the news of the Perry-sisters-bishop fight, focused on the sisters' disapproval of Katy Perry. They were not impressed, he wrote, when they saw her sing, "Let you put your hands on me in my skin-tight jeans," during the Super Bowl half-time show.

What the story didn't include was the background of the sisters' buyer, a restaurateur and driver of gentrification. Dana Hollister, according to the LA Times, once ran a club called Bordello and wanted to transform another former convent into a hotel. Earlier this year she obtained permits to transform Pilgrim Church into a boutique hotel with 4,000 square feet of restaurant and bar space. (I've been to her bar Villains Tavern and enjoy her eclectic, preservationist style, but bars are not exactly pious businesses.)

There are other options for these spaces.

Not far from the disputed convent, the Dream Center, a Christian organization that fights poverty, is housed in a former Catholic hospital. After Queen of Angels Hospital closed, the Franciscan sisters who ran it had lucrative offers

from entertainment companies, yet they sold the building to the Dream Center at a greatly discounted rate because of its alignment with their mission.

In wake of declining numbers, some churches are becoming community arts centers, renting space out to non-profits during the week. In Los Angeles, the Pico-Union Project provides a home for multiple congregations—Jewish, Christian and Muslim—that couldn't sustain a building on their own. It's housed in the original Sinai Temple, which served as a Presbyterian church for 88 years.

Nathan Marion, who helps churches redefine their spaces in Seattle, says that such arrangements align with the mission of churches, helping them survive despite falling numbers and meet a need among the un-churched. "Having a place where people can connect and be in a community where they feel welcome and as safe as possible in a public event, I think that's really important, and it's missing in a lot of people's lives," he told Religion Dispatches.

In dorm-like convents, other groups can move in. I lived in a former convent after college with 11 other recent graduates (both women and men) as a part of a full-time volunteer program.

Other Catholic volunteer programs allow young women to live with sisters while serving their community for a year or two. Non-profit organizations generally pay the volunteer organization to support the young people's living expenses in exchange for their service.

Two sisters in Chicago are behind shelters for migrants housed in a former convent and theology school dorm. An interfaith organization has raised funds to support the houses.

The sisters tipped me off to what Pope Francis had to say about empty convents. "Empty convents are not for the church to transform into hotels and make money from them. Empty convents are not ours, they are for the flesh of Christ: refugees," he said at Centro Astalli, a Jesuit refugee center in Rome.

Pope Francis's statement was directed at religious congregations in Italy—Centro Astalli served 34,000 migrants in 2014, but more than 500 monasteries and convents advertise rooms for rent to tourists on MonasteryStays.com. I went to Italy last fall to see how the church responded to the pope's challenge. Relatively few congregations had opened their doors to migrants, but at least in active convents, hotel revenues help sustain sisters' ministries with "the flesh of Christ."

In the Los Angeles dispute, Hollister denies the archdiocese claims that she wants to transform the former convent into a hotel and restaurant, saying she doesn't have plans for the property yet. But if Perry wins, it's unlikely to become a shelter for the poor either. The proceeds from the convent's sale could be invested in another ministry, but both the sisters and the archdiocese also could think creatively about what the space could become.

"It'll be left to the courts, if not the pope, to figure it all out," Lopez wrote.

If Pope Francis has his way, he may have to amend his previous statement: Empty convents aren't to house tourists, pop stars or even bars. ■

L.A.'s Congregations Raise New Questions About Multiracial Churches

by Andrew Johnson
March 11, 2015

The Southern Baptist Convention is turning its attention to race this month, with its policy arm changing the topic of its annual spring summit from bioethics to multiracial churches. The move revealed that even the United States' most conservative denominations have taken notice of the thousands of people who protested in the streets after the acquittals of police officers in the deaths of unarmed black men in New York, Los Angeles and Ferguson.

But the announcement of the theme change, which was delivered at a luncheon in Nashville (a city that is 60 percent white and 30 percent black), also revealed how difficult it has been to integrate America's "most segregated hour." Only four of the 100 attendees at the luncheon were African-American.

Multiracial religious groups have been a consistent theme in conversations between CRCC researchers during the first months of Religious Competition and Creative Innovation project. The racial composition of a downtown church I recently visited is 40 percent Korean-American, 40 percent African-American, 10 to 15 percent Latino and 5 to 10 percent white. After describing the church to a colleague, I followed up with a tongue-in-check proclamation. "This is the only congregation in the history of global Christianity with this particular racial composition," I said.

I was joking, but my colleague quickly responded, "That sounds close to what I saw at the church I visited yesterday." In fact, there are dozens of churches with similar racial make-ups throughout Los Angeles.

Sociologists have thoroughly studied multiracial, Protestant congregations in the United States, but nearly all of the research has focused on congregations where whites have been the majority racial group or first minority. In Southern California, though, the most diverse region in the country, white worshipers may represent the third or fourth largest racial group in a congregation, or they might not be present at all. Studying these sorts of churches has the potential to broaden the way sociologists think about multiracial churches

and opens avenues for future research.

For example, sociologists Ryon Cobb, Samuel Perry and Kevin Dougherty recently used data from General Social Survey and National Congregations Studies to argue that "multiracial congregations leave dominant White racial frames unchallenged, potentially influencing minority attendees to embrace such frames." The RCCI project's preliminary research raises a number of questions: What about the multiracial churches with few if any white people? Do these churches shape members' racial frames in the same ways? Do white people have to be sitting in the pews of a church for the congregation to affirm "dominant White racial frames"?

Another question to pursue is, how does the racial composition of a congregation shape the theology of the congregants? In their book *Growing Up in America: The Power of Race in the Lives of Teens*, Brad Christensen, Korie Edwards and Richard Flory (the lead researcher for RCCI) argue that white and black teenagers understand the role of God in their lives in different ways. Based on survey data, white teenagers in the U.S. talked about God from a "therapeutic individualism" perspective that frames God's primary role as providing self-fulfillment in individuals' lives and helping them to confront daily challenges. Black teenagers, on the other hand, emphasized obedience to God over God serving their individual needs. So the particular races involved in, or absent from a multiracial church could profoundly shape the way God is talked about in the sermons, small groups and among members.

At this stage of the research project, the multiracial churches we have encountered raise more questions than they answer. But these churches reaffirm the idea that place matters when studying religious congregations. Place also matters when religious leaders meet to talk about the future of their organizations. One could imagine that a summit on multiracial churches held in Los Angeles would have a different dynamic than the same summit held in Nashville or in any other American cities. ■

Made in Los Angeles— How One Church Changed with its Community

by *Andrew Johnson*
June 15, 2015

At her old church, church leaders looked “at me like a sinner for plucking my eyebrows!” remembered Sonia. The church’s gender-specific regulations, imported from the congregation’s mother church in El Salvador, also affected Sonia’s life outside church. At work, she was uncharacteristically passive and shied away from leadership opportunities.

“How can I be oppressed at my church, but a leader at work?” she told me. “Coming from a church where women were oppressed, there was no way I could become a leader at my job.”

Sonia didn’t want a new religion, but she did want a Spanish-speaking church that spoke to her life as an Angeleno. She found Restauracion-LA. The Pentecostal church shows what it takes to successfully reinvent a congregation to appeal to a younger generation of worshippers.

At Restauracion-LA, Sonia could wear lipstick and sit next to her husband during the worship service, but most significantly, she saw women actively involved in prominent leadership roles. “As soon as I came here and I saw the leadership of Pastor Molina’s wife, Pastor Hanelory... something happened within me,” Sonia said. She credited her recent promotions at work to the model of leadership she experienced at her new church.

For a long time, though, Restauracion-LA was just like Sonia’s previous church. In 2008, pastors Rene and Hanelory Molina asked themselves a difficult question: “Are we going to be an El Salvadorian church located in Los Angeles or we will be a Los Angeles church built and founded by El Salvadorians?”

Restauracion-LA had grown from a few dozen members to 5,000 members primarily though people who, like the Molinas, were born in Central America. “For many years my wife and I did our ministry the way it was done in El Salvador,” Pastor Rene told me. “We had to think the way they thought, dress the way they dressed, sing the way they sang. We were almost like a

photocopy of El Salvador in Los Angeles. But we began to see questions coming from the younger generation.”

If the church were to continue to flourish in the future, the pastors decided that it would be through members born primarily in Los Angeles, not Central America. Their strategy hinged on answering the questions arising from the “younger generation” and keeping them in the pews.

Keeping teenagers and Millennials in the pews is no small task. Recent findings show that less than half of Americans between the ages of 23 and 28 attend any sort of religious service at all. In Spanish-speaking churches like Restauracion-LA, many members in their twenties were born in different countries and very different cultural contexts than their parents, adding to the challenge now facing many churches.

To engage with this younger generation, Restauracion-LA leadership took an institutional inventory to identify the beliefs and practices that constitutes the of their Pentecostal Christianity. Their goal was to hold onto the essentials but be innovative around everything else, even if it those decisions meant straying from Central American Pentecostal culture.

“We were willing to change our structure if it enabled us to better meet the needs of people,” Molina said. “Our calling from God transcends culture. God doesn’t call us to import one culture to another, he calls us to establish his culture within the cultures.”

The rigid, gender-based requirements Restauracion-LA had inherited from their denomination in El Salvador were the first to go. From 2008 forward, men and women no longer were required to sit in gender-assigned sections in the sanctuary and the strict requirements regulating clothing, facial hair, use of cosmetics and hairstyles were relaxed.

As women took a more prominent role in teaching and worship, the Molinas braced themselves for the reaction. “We lost a lot of members,” Molina said. “The most difficult time was 7 years ago. We were a congregation of

about 5,000 and we lost 1,200 people after the change. But we knew that there was no other way. I have no regrets and I would do it again.”

At a recent worship service and all-church picnic, I saw hundreds of teenagers and Millennials. Though Restauracion-LA’s membership is still below what it was pre-2008, the two events suggest that the church’s vision is resonating with an age group that is increasingly adverse to organized religion.

My colleague Richard Flory framed the data on the decreasing participation of Americans in religious institutions as “less a story of people ‘losing their religion’ than one of dissatisfaction with the institutional options available to them.” If his hunch is correct, other churches might want to look at Restauracion-LA as an example of a congregation that maintained its core theological concepts and practices, but was willing to radically transform itself as an institution to better meet the needs of the immediate community. ■



BOTTOM MIDDLE AND RIGHT: COURTESY OF RESTAURACION-LA

How Will Church Plants Grow Without Becoming Megachurches?

by Andrew Johnson
July 21, 2015

Six years ago, Peter Guinta and his wife decided to leave their megachurch in Orange County because they wanted a place where they could “be known and know others.” Guinta felt like a spectator in the 6,000-member church and wanted to “feel part of something, not just be a face or number.”

The Guintas decided to try out a small church plant in downtown Long Beach called The Garden. The start-up congregation was 100 times smaller than their previous church, but they were attracted to The Garden’s emphasis on transparency and meaningful relationships among congregants. He saw it as the right combination of first and twenty-first century Christianity.

“What worked in the 1980’s doesn’t fly with our generation,” said Guinta, the worship and community care pastor. “Our generation is looking for real relationships, they are looking for a place when they can say, ‘I’m part of this, I’m not just a number.’ ... What we are realizing is that maybe the Bible had it right when the model was small.”

But The Garden hasn’t stayed small.

More than 500 people now regularly attend its Sunday services and the church’s building fund is growing every month. A dynamic pastor leads The Garden, close to 70 percent of the Sunday attendees participate in a small group, the church is attracting young families, and it has a growing financial base. All indicators point to continued growth.

“Sounds like you are on the path to becoming a megachurch?” I asked Guinta.

He leaned back on his chair, laughed, shook his head and said, “God help us!”

Backlash may be too strong a word, but a growing number of evangelicals are not convinced that bigger is better. How the churches that appeal to this group handle growth will have a lasting impact on how churches are structured.

Resistance to the megachurch model is based on the assumption that there is an inverse relationship between the size of the church and

the depth of the relationships among members. Many evangelicals in their 20s and 30s believe that the bigger the church, the more difficult it is to have genuine and authentic relationships with other church members and church leadership.

Eliot started attending The Garden around the same time as Guinta, when the congregation was no more than 50 people. “I just think that my heart really longs for the church to experience what I experience in AA (Alcoholics Anonymous),” he told me. “In AA, if you’re going to too many speaker meetings, where there are really large bodies of people, let’s say 100 people, and there’s one speaker and that’s all you’re doing, you eventually will get drunk. So I think big churches are great; I just think there’s a real need for engagement, community and responsibility to people. You get lost in those big, big places.”

The Garden’s leaders, like many evangelical leaders, are now faced with the challenge of growing without losing their small-church feel. “We’re going to grow into a large church, I think, but it won’t look like just a big building with lots of people,” said The Garden’s lead pastor, 30-year-old Darren Rouanzion.

In 10 years, Rouanzion told me, “I think we’ll have lots of churches. I want to start a family of churches all over Southern California. ... I see us starting a network of church leadership, a network of churches really. I think the future is interdependent church networks where we’re sharing the same story, but there’s local autonomous leaders and shared resources.”

Such networks—not traditional denominations or single-site megachurches—are the future of Protestantism, according to sociologists Brad Christerson and Richard Flory in their book, *The Rise of Network Christianity: How Independent Leaders are Changing the Religious Landscape*. Macro-level social changes, including globalization, growing pluralism and the digital revolution, have given competitive advantages to religious groups organized by networks rather than by traditionally organized congregations and denominations.

The network form of governance allows innovative individual leaders to experiment with unorthodox beliefs and practices without regulation from governing religious bodies, while at the same time facilitating collaboration with other like-minded individual leaders across the globe to expand the scale and influence of their ministries. The book claims that network forms of governance results in religious groups that are more experimental and more focused on practice rather than theology. This structure allows be-

lievers to customize their own religious practices to a greater extent than what is possible in a traditionally organized congregation or denomination.

American Protestantism is changing. While traditional denominations and mega-church models are not obsolete, congregations like The Garden will serve as experimental sites of new organizational models for Protestant churches. ■



BOTTOM RIGHT: COURTESY OF THE GARDEN

Katy Perry's Not the Only One Who Wants to Live in a Convent

by Megan Sweas
July 22, 2015

This post originally appeared on Zocalo Public Square. TIME.com also published the piece.

I moved into a convent 10 years ago this summer.

My roommates were not Catholic sisters, but other recent college graduates, who sometimes acted a little too much as if we were still living in a college dorm. But most of our time was dedicated to service of our community—teaching, leading afterschool programs, counseling pregnant teens and gang members, working with the elderly—just as the sisters who preceded us in the convent had once done.

The news that pop star Katy Perry wants to buy a former convent in Los Feliz has me thinking about my days at Amate House, a full-time Catholic volunteer program in Chicago. The *Los Angeles Times* broke the story that two nuns are blocking the archdiocese from selling the estate to Perry, who wants to live there. Early coverage of the story centered on the sister's disapproval of the "I Kissed A Girl" singer.

My fond memories of convent living, though, make me wonder if the question of whether Perry is a suitable successor to the sisters misses the point. As our society become less connected to religious institutions, it may be more important than ever for communities to think creatively and sensitively about how to make use of formerly religious spaces.

I had never imagined that I would live in a convent. Amate House operates three houses, two of which were convents, with both male and female volunteers, and it is part of the Chicago archdiocese. But I approached it more like Peace Corps or Teach for America: an opportunity to do something special, learn about life in the inner city and give back—not to live out my faith. I identified myself as a "practicing-but-not-believing Catholic." I had volunteered with my high school youth group through college, but I was more interested in Buddhism than Christianity.

Though I defied typical categories—neither fully Catholic nor a religious "none"—my experience reflects the trend of young Americans disaffiliating from institutional religion and forming their own religious identities and understandings.

My grandmother, in contrast, grew up wanting to be a Catholic sister. Unfortunately for her (but thankfully for me), she lacked the education to join a religious congregation. Instead, she got married and raised my father and his four brothers.

Seeking to understand my recently deceased grandmother's devotion—why would a woman voluntarily commit her life to a patriarchal church?—I wrote about Catholic sisters for a class in college. The nun in her nineties that I profiled couldn't explain her vocation other than as a call from God.

Her order had once occupied a huge motherhouse in my hometown and sent teachers to schools throughout the Midwest. In northwest Iowa, she had taught art to a budding cartoonist who would go on to work for Disney and draw the genie in *Aladdin*. But by the time I visited, they had moved to a smaller house, essentially a nursing home for sisters.

Their grand old motherhouse became Loyola University Chicago's education school. The sisters were happy that a Catholic institution was continuing their legacy, but then Loyola moved to sell the property to a developer that planned to raze the convent and put in single-family homes.

The city intervened, and the building still stands as senior housing. But the sale of convents and churches to developers is not unusual. Around the same time, my parents moved into a development in a neighboring suburb that had been built on the grounds of a former convent. And when I lived in a convent, my window looked out on a Protestant church that had been converted to condos.

Such examples will become more common as people move away from institutional religion. Places that once brought together a community

become individual units, our architecture seeming to reflect our spiritual trends.

Yet, many still long for a sense of togetherness, even if in untraditional ways. My convent roommates and I were not all regular churchgoers, despite living above a chapel where daily mass was held. Our “church” came in the form of meals, reflection nights, and service to the broader community.

But buildings can’t be preserved just for community. In exchange for our service, our work sites paid Amate House small fees to cover our living expenses, including our convent housing. Another solution is to make churches into community arts centers, renting space out to nonprofits during the week. Both situations provide a win-win for religious institutions and nonprofit organizations.

A year or so ago, I met with two sisters in Chicago who were in the process of opening a migrant shelter in an old convent, supported by an interfaith organization. They told me what Pope Francis had recently said at Centro Astalli, a refugee center in Rome: “Empty convents are not for the church to transform into hotels and make money from them. Empty convents are not ours, they are for the flesh of Christ: refugees.”

Intrigued by this tension between money and mission, I applied to and received an International Reporting Project fellowship to find out if Pope Francis had affected Italy’s welcome of migrants. Visiting Centro Astalli and other refugee centers around Rome, I met many migrants living on the street or in abandoned buildings, unable to find work or housing in their new country. Two men showed me how they survived while homeless in Rome, sleeping at Termini train station, passing their days in a park behind the Colosseum and seeking services at churches and convents.

For my last few days in Rome, I checked into a convent hotel along their daily path, a few blocks from Termini. Once again, I found myself in a spartan single.

My convent hotel was clean and comfortable, European beds being what they are. And for not much more than the price of a hostel, I had a private, quiet space.

Four sisters lived on the top floor, and one of them told me that they make themselves available to travelers for either logistical or spiritual concerns. Many orders consider hospitality to pilgrims as part of their mission. In addition to tourists, they host student groups and families of patients from a nearby hospital. And the hotel helps fund their work in the missions.

Yet, when I saw the generous breakfast spread for what seemed like a handful of guests, I couldn’t help but think of the homeless migrants I had met on the streets of Rome. If the government, churches, or nonprofits paid for even a few migrants’ room at this convent, I wondered, how would the tourists staying there react?

Some argue that the pope’s statement against convent hotels reflects the male hierarchy’s desire to control the hard-earned assets of women in religious orders. In Los Angeles, the Katy Perry story is more about who manages the proceeds of the sale—the nuns or the archbishop—than whether Perry or someone else is the next owner of the convent.

I, for one, would trust a group of sisters more than the archdiocese to put the millions earned from the sale to good use. Yet the sisters’ buyer, a driver of gentrification who is also currently refurbishing the former Pilgrim Church into a hotel and restaurant, is no more likely than Perry to transform the convent into a homeless shelter.

As religious institutions decline, not all religious buildings will survive. But as someone who enjoyed living in a convent—temporarily—I would hope that some could be transformed into shelters, art centers, homes for nonprofit or volunteer organizations or other projects that benefit the whole community.

With a little creativity, Catholic sisters’ spirit can live on in a very concrete way. ■

What Real Estate Battles Say about Church

by Richard Flory
September 17, 2015

**This post also appeared on
Huffington Post Religion.**

What makes a church, a church? Is it the buildings? The programs? The members? These questions come to mind with recent real estate transactions involving (formerly) sacred ground.

The Los Angeles real estate battle over a former convent involving pop star Katy Perry has attracted great attention, but it's not the only controversial sale of church property in Southern California.

In Newport Beach, the L.A. Episcopal diocese has apparently decided that townhomes should replace a local church. In May, unbeknownst to its ministers or parishioners, Bishop J. Jon Bruno announced that the diocese had sold St. James the Great Church for \$15 million to a local developer who has plans to build pricey townhomes on the site.

These two examples are the leading edge of what is likely to be a more common occurrence—churches being sold for their real estate value because of declining memberships and aging parishioners who can no longer support the needs of the physical plant. We saw this with the Crystal Cathedral. Both it and St. James the Great are wealthy, but small and aging, congregations.

So, what exactly is a “church”?

The St. James the Great leadership and members have focused on their building (and understandably so), stating on their “Save St. James the Great” website that the Episcopal diocese is “selling the soul” of the church.

St. James the Great is a young church, started after the original St. James Church withdrew from the U.S. Episcopal Church and aligned itself with the Anglican Church in North America. The new St. James the Great invested in building this mission congregation into a successful church, given only 20 months within which to do it, although apparently they were never apprised that the clock was ticking on their efforts.

In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if this whole deal was a long-term real estate play from the beginning. In 2013 the diocese won a long court battle over the same property with the former congregation, which wanted to keep the church building. The diocese may have planned to sell the property after winning it back from the break-off church all along.

But, if we look at either the Anglican St. James or the Episcopal St. James the Great, neither church is attracting large numbers of members, nor are they attracting very many younger members and their families. These are, to put it bluntly, older, white, upper-middle class churches that maintain a liturgy that appeals to fewer people these days.

St. James the Great is located in a town where many people are at the beach or brunch on Sunday mornings, and it is also situated in a vibrant local religious marketplace. Within a couple of miles of St. James, there are no fewer than a dozen churches of all types, including another Episcopal church, several megachurches, a franchise outlet of Saddleback Church (the megachurch from south Orange County) and other smaller churches. Their future is dependent on their ability to compete with whatever these other churches have to offer their current and potential members.

There are people within the L.A. Episcopal Diocese—including Bishop Bruno—who both recognize the problems facing the church, and are supporting experiments within the church to see if other forms of congregational life might be developed that also maintain ties to the older traditions.

Through the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture's research on religious creativity and innovation, we've seen several examples of such experimental Episcopal congregations in the L.A. area: Holy Spirit Silver Lake, which meets in an art gallery space above a restaurant; Thom's in Huntington Beach, which now is focused almost entirely on their Laundry Love efforts (serving others is “church” for them); and perhaps the



most successful to date, Thad's in Santa Monica, which meets in the Bergamot Station Arts Center.

What these have in common with each other and with the larger Episcopal Church is a commitment to an inclusive community and pursuing social justice and social service. Where they part company is in how they administer the Eucharist and how they feel when you enter. You really don't feel like an outsider when you enter, as is often the case when someone enters a more traditional Episcopal (or Catholic for that matter) church.

From this perspective, the \$15 million from the sale of St James the Great takes on new meaning. Maybe those townhomes will provide some needed capital to put more churches in less-obvious places, whether school buildings, bars, coffee houses or parks, thus making them more accessible to greater numbers of people who would never darken the door of a traditional church building—of whatever sort.

Does it matter where a church worships? Certainly religious traditions and theologies say that buildings matter, but worship spaces are also shaped by other factors not having anything to do with religion, such as generational preferences and trends. How churches balance tradition, theology and economic and demographic change will go a long way toward explaining their future viability.

Meanwhile, St. James the Great is not going down without a fight. Although they have been locked out of their former building, they have been meeting across the street in a small park outside of a high-rise condo building. They even claim to have attracted new members as they've faced their location crisis.

In fighting for its building, St. James the Great has shown that a church is more than just a building. It is also its members, however and wherever they manage to gather to create community—even in a park. ■



In the Age of Megachurches, Sometimes Less Is More

by Richard Flory
March 11, 2016

**This post originally appeared on
Religion Dispatches.**

We have long known, as sociologist Mark Chaves says, that “most congregations in the United States are small, but most people are in large congregations.”

Indeed, a recent study shows that in recent years megachurches have grown while the size of the “average” church in the U.S. has shrunk from an average attendance of 100 people in 2006 to 76 in 2012.

But what is also clear from the research, as in a recent report from Duke University, is that the larger the church, the less engaged the congregants are in the life of the church.

Nevertheless these and other reports imply that the future of Christianity lies in the megachurch, with its multitude of options for members and visitors, and the ease of entry that these churches afford. The assumption is that people are attracted to the variety of programs and the top-notch worship services, which then leads to deeper involvement in the life of the church through small groups and other types of programming.

At the same time the picture of smaller churches painted in these reports is that they are located in small towns across the country that are themselves emptying out.

So we have, the reports imply, two types of churches: first there’s the dying small-town church, complete with elderly pastor and greying (mostly female) congregation; second, there’s the vibrant, innovative and option-loaded megachurch that draws congregants from a broad geographic area into its spiritual vortex.

But is this an accurate picture of churches in America?

In our current project at the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture (CRCC), we have interacted with pastors and members of megachurches, mid-sized and small churches all around Los Angeles and Seoul, South Korea. We have watched as megachurches have been founded

and grown, while other megachurches have shrunk or diminished. In at least one case, we’ve seen a megachurch go out of business altogether and then re-form as a much smaller church. And, we have observed several thriving and innovative churches that are small by design, allowing them to nurture a spiritual community while serving the communities that host them.

So while reports suggest that big is somehow better, this isn’t the whole story.

These smaller community-minded churches may not appear to be anything really new—but we must remember that innovation is not the same as *invention*. It can be innovative to adapt or rediscover something old, to invite renewal.

For example, if you look at older urban areas, you will find many examples of smaller neighborhood churches that have minimal to zero parking. In L.A., the car capital of the world, this suggests that at the time these churches were established people walked or drove the several blocks from their homes to church. The scale of the buildings themselves prohibited these neighborhood churches from becoming big enough to annoy their neighbors with an influx of churchgoing outsiders.

What we’re finding is a renewed emphasis on the local community that is attracting mostly younger, college educated congregants—not the blue-haired members suggested by the tiny small-town churches usually cited in these reports. These new, smaller churches are capitalizing on the appeal of urban areas to younger people. They offer both the urban vibe and the opportunities for creating smaller Christian communities and the many social outreach opportunities that inevitably present themselves in cities.

And, as a function of their size, it is much harder to be a “free-rider” in these churches than it is in most megachurches. The spiritual community might be smaller, but it asks for deeper involvement from its members.

None of this is to suggest that there aren’t urban megachurches in this mix as well. I could list several in Los Angeles, New York, Chica-



go, or any other large metropolitan area, that are attracting large numbers of young, college educated congregants. Yet in many cases, these churches represent the problem faced by any mass event: it is easy to attend, and equally easy to avoid deeper commitment to the life of the church.

The point is that what is often missed by these large scale surveys—and the media reporting of them—is that megachurches are not the

only game in town. Smaller churches, operating in the urban context, are also attracting newcomers.

Megachurches are, by definition, a big deal. But if we look to them as the source of all things innovative, we are contemplating the future of American Christianities through a narrow lens. ■



Doug Kerr, Flickr

Mapping the New Landscape of Religion in Los Feliz

by Richard Flory, Nalika Gajaweera, Andrew Johnson, and Nick Street
March 17, 2016

**This article originally appeared in
BOOM: A Journal of California.**

Mt. Hollywood Congregational Church was in trouble. Its congregation had become too small to sustain the decaying Los Feliz building that had once been the spiritual home for a community of about 300 people. Its pastor had resigned in poor health.

So it fell to Jim Burklo, chair of the church's building committee, to state the obvious to the remaining seventy-five or so members: "We got no pastor. We've got a building that's a wreck. And there's no money."

Burklo said later of his fellow congregants: "These are all teachers and actors and musicians. You know, these people don't have any money. There were maybe three people in the whole group who could cough up more than a standard pledge. So it's like, forget it."

So in 2011, the congregation decided to sell its building, a century-old outpost of a rapidly declining Protestant denomination, and rent space from a nearby Lutheran church that was also becoming a shadow of its former self. For some, a minority of members, Mt. Hollywood's identity was inseparable from its historic home, and they chose to leave the fold rather than move into the Lutherans' renovated Sunday School space.

Burklo cast Mt. Hollywood's transition in a positive light. "Some of the people who quit were kind of very traditional," he said. "I think the most important aspect of this transition has been that we did not wait until we completely evaporated before we decided to make the change." The congregants who remained, he said, "were loose, free-spirited characters who were like, this is great. It was like a millstone dropped off the neck. Let's focus on our community and not on the churchy stuff. The whole group just felt light."

Mt. Hollywood's willingness to divest itself of some of its institutional trappings—in addition to selling its physical plant, the church dropped many elements of its formal liturgy—was a prerequisite for Anne Cohen, who accepted a call as minister to Mt. Hollywood a few months after the congregation made its move.

"If they had not sold the building I would not have applied for the job," Cohen said. "They had such an amazing reputation of being world-changers and community service people, and they couldn't do it anymore, because that building was a mess and they didn't have the money to fix it. I didn't want to serve a church where maintenance was the main issue."

At first glance, Mt. Hollywood's story seems to affirm the broader narrative that dominates news about religious affiliation in the United States. We're living in a time of great religious flux. Nearly a third of young adults in the United States have left organized religion altogether. Survey data from Pew and other national polling organizations show that mainline Protestants are losing the numbers game, and that most of those who are still drawn to established communities are far less attached to traditional institutions than were their parents and grandparents.¹ Many traditional institutions—particularly mainline Protestant denominations like the Lutherans and Congregationalists—are edging toward extinction.

Still, the news of religion's imminent demise is more than a little premature. Our research on religious innovation and change in Southern California suggests that understanding how Mt. Hollywood and other diverse congregations fit into the vibrant religious ecology of their neighborhoods yields a far more complex—and dynamic—picture of the potential future of American religion than those reports suggest.

"We were doing a food pantry with them every week here on this site," said Reverend Dr. Neil Cazares-Thomas as he stood in the basement of the building that had formerly housed Mt. Hollywood Congregational Church. Over the

buzz of saws and the thump of hammers, he said, “They contacted me just before Christmas and said look, you know, we’re in decline. We can’t afford the building. Would you be interested in buying it from us? And I thought for two seconds and said absolutely.”

Cazares-Thomas’s congregation, Founders Metropolitan Community Church, had outgrown its facility in West Hollywood and purchased a former Methodist church in Los Feliz in 2008. Five years later, Founders MCC—a “radically inclusive” Protestant denomination founded in the late 1960s by a gay, former Pentecostal pastor—was already bursting at the seams of its new home. Mt. Hollywood’s church, about a mile away, was just the right fit. “We’re now averaging about 300 folks over three services on a Sunday,” said Cazares-Thomas.

Founders MCC’s former home was in turn bought by the Kadampa Meditation Center-Hollywood in 2013. KMC-Hollywood, one of eight Kadampa centers in California, has become a sort of neighborhood Buddhist temple, typically attracting forty to fifty people to the classes and guided meditations they offer most days of the week, according to resident teacher Gen Kelsang Rigpa.

“It’s really local,” Rigpa said. “I would say literally 95 percent of the people that come here say the same thing: ‘I’ve been driving by this place for a year. I’ve seen it, I live around the corner, I just wanted to check it out.’”

In Los Feliz, in neighboring Silver Lake, and across the rest of Southern California, our research team—two sociologists, an anthropologist, and a journalist—found a dramatic proliferation in the number of choices available to those who are looking for both spiritual practice and community. To our surprise, we did not come across many religious mashups—few Muslafarians or Buddangelicals in the mix—though we have come across a few. But if you want a self-help take on Tibetan meditation, a godless re-

covery group, gay-friendly Catholic mass, hipster Bible study, socially conscious evangelicalism, or freeform mainline Protestantism, you are living in the right era. Far from being vitiated by the overall religious disaffiliation trend evident in the United States, religion in Southern California is being revitalized by it, as religious “nones” create new forms of purposeful community and spark innovation among groups that may have never before experimented with rituals, worship styles, or modes of organization.

Indeed, in our research, we are not finding a spiritual wasteland but, rather, a wild, wild West of religion.

Los Feliz is a small neighborhood—about two square miles, bounded by the Los Angeles River, Griffith Park, and Western Avenue to the east, north, and west. The neighborhood’s southern boundary is subject to some debate. Depending on whom you ask, Los Feliz is a rectangle completed by Sunset or Santa Monica Boulevard, or an inverted triangle with its bottom angle composed of the intersection of Heliotrope and Melrose (known to the local hipsters as “Hel-Mel”).

More than 40 percent of its roughly 40,000 residents are foreign born—an unusually high statistic, even by Los Angeles standards. Among the diverse array of immigrant groups, the most common countries of origin are Armenia (21 percent) and Mexico (10 percent). At \$50,000 a year, the average household income in Los Feliz is in the middle of the bell curve for Los Angeles County, but that unremarkable number belies a very atypical range of incomes in such a small area. Tony hillside mansions between Los Feliz Boulevard and Griffith Park attract A-list actors, rock stars, and movie producers. Dense, pedestrian- and transit-friendly areas along Vermont and Hillhurst are popular with young creative types. The “flats” below Sunset are much poorer and denser than areas farther north.

This dramatically varied cultural and socioeconomic mix makes Los Feliz a microcosm of the diversity of Greater Los Angeles. Within

the neighborhood's two square miles, there are no fewer than fifty religious groups, including Catholics, Mormons, Pentecostals, Buddhists, Jews, Self-Realization Fellowship, the Church of Scientology, and Atheists United, which although it is irreligious, functions as a type of "church" of unbelief. Los Feliz's eclecticism is also remarkably dynamic. Gentrification is rapidly reshaping its cultural landscape, along with its religious ecosystem.

Los Feliz and neighboring Silver Lake combine to form one of the "coolest" areas in Los Angeles, putting it in the running for one of the coolest places on Earth. How do you measure cool? In 2012, *Forbes* magazine analyzed neighborhood data such as walkability scores, the prevalence of coffee shops, the percentage of residents who work in artistic occupations, and access to food trucks. Once the numbers were crunched, they named Silver Lake as the "Best Hipster Neighborhood" in the United States. The writers at *Forbes* are not the only ones measuring cool. In late 2013, the Los Angeles County real estate website PropertyShark.com crowned Los Feliz as LA's "Most Rapidly-Gentrifying Neighborhood."

Whether it is called urban renewal or gentrification, the process is fairly straightforward. Artists, recent college grads, yuppies, and empty-nesters—largely but not exclusively white—move into strategically situated urban neighborhoods like Los Feliz. The new arrivals open coffee shops and restaurants, renovate their homes, and attract improved city services, all of which increase the demand for housing and cause home prices and rents to spike.

Although gentrification in and around Los Feliz has had a predictable impact on the cost of housing, the impact on religious congregations is not as clear. Some congregations have been immune to the demographic shifts. At first glance,

Centro Cristiano Pentecostal seems vulnerable to the exodus of working-class Latino residents from the area. The Spanish-speaking Pentecostal church sits only a few blocks from vintage clothing stores and bars offering "hand-crafted" cocktails on Vermont Avenue, but it isn't going anywhere. Its three weekend services followed by potluck meals served in the parking lot draw over 400 worshippers, and the building buzzes with activity nearly every day of the week.

Centro Cristiano Pentecostal owns its building, so the congregation's operating budget doesn't need to rise to keep pace with climbing rental prices. As the surrounding neighborhood has changed, fewer members walk or take the bus to church than in the past, but the church offers a sense of belonging and a traditional Pentecostal worship service that is hard to duplicate. Membership has remained steady because congregants are willing to drive from all over the city for the vibrant and intense experience of its Pentecostal service.

Other congregations have recently opened in Los Feliz to cater to the spiritual needs of the creative class that has flocked to the area. Pastors Sam and Priya Theophylus emigrated from India as church planters and were drawn to the neighborhood because, as Pastor Sam says in a video posted on their church's website, "Los Feliz is a neighborhood that creates. . . people are such seekers here."²

Their church, the Beautiful Gate, occupies a rented space above a clothing boutique. Pastors Sam and Priya lead weekly services that they have specifically tailored to new and emerging sensibilities in this rapidly changing neighborhood.

Not all religious groups are equally equipped to weather the gentrification process. Pastor Ed Carey built his congregation, Hope International Bible Fellowship, by ministering to the down-and-out living on the area's grittiest streets. Twice a day the fellowship serves hot meals to local homeless and working poor



people, and the church has graduated hundreds of people from its residential, substance-abuse recovery program. The transformation of Los Feliz over the past decade or so has both dramatically decreased the number of local residents in need of a free meal, and increased the number of neighbor complaints about the small crowds that assemble outside the church during mealtimes. Passing by a new, stylish restaurant offering “organic, local, and small-farm produce” Carey recalled that, ten years ago, “People were scared to come here. Now on Sunday mornings they line up all the way down the block waiting in line for brunch.” There was no sarcasm or animosity in Carey’s voice, but, gazing philosophically at the sharply dressed lunch crowd, he asked, “I wonder if our congregation will gentrify, too?”

Founders Metropolitan Community Church is the flagship congregation of the Metropolitan Community Church movement, which was established in 1968 by Rev. Troy Perry. Historically, Founders MCC—and the MCC movement—has served the spiritual needs of the LGBT community, though more recently the church has been attracting straight members who are drawn to its nonjudgmental approach to religion. The church describes itself as “radically inclusive,” which most obviously relates to sexual identity (LGBT and straight), but also encompasses the wide range of spiritual needs and beliefs that people bring through the church door. In addition to telegraphing its openness to an unusually wide range of identities, the phrase “come as you are” at Founders MCC also means that worshipers are invited to shape their own beliefs about what or who God is, and about how “s/he” operates in the universe as well as in their individual lives.

Lisa Arnold, who has been attending Founders MCC for several years said, “I had heard about it and I knew it was a gay church. I didn’t know the history of it, about Reverend Troy. I’ve learned all of that since I’ve been here. But the one thing that I felt was love, acceptance, and

worthiness. The fact that you can walk into a place that fully accepts you. . . really is just such a blessing.”

Most of Founders MCC’s members are middle-aged or older, although there are a handful of younger people in the congregation. Its cultural and ethnic mix is remarkably diverse for a Protestant congregation, and the crowds at Sunday services are about evenly divided between solo attendees and couples. Just like many predominantly straight churches, Founders MCC has a big focus on “family.” This emphasis is a part of a broader push to create a deeper sense of community for members, many of whom—both gay and straight—are parents of young children. PJ Escobar, who is originally from Texas and who spends almost all of his free time volunteering at the church, said that when he first came to the church, he realized he had found a home. “I knew that I finally belonged somewhere,” Escobar said. “These people here are my family.”

This keen focus on the cultivation of a sense of belonging points toward one of the most remarkable characteristics of Founders MCC, which is in some respects a “mini-megachurch.” Even though each of the three Sunday services draws no more than 100 people, the church operates as a community center of sorts for Los Feliz. Over the course of any given week, several different community organizations, spiritual and Bible study groups, twelve-step groups, and a pre-school use the church’s meeting spaces. Founders MCC has also nurtured relationships with other churches and organizations in the community, collaborating, for example, with Holy Spirit Silver Lake and a nearby Mormon church on different service-oriented projects. These different groups and activities mean that about a thousand people pass through Founders MCC during a typical week, giving the relatively modest church an outsize cultural footprint in the community.

Located in a loft-like gallery space above Barella’s Bar and Kitchen on Hyperion Avenue, Holy Spirit Silver Lake is a small, “off the books”

experimental congregation. Holy Spirit started as a home Bible-study group that has evolved into a small congregation with twenty to twenty-five people attending services on Thursday evenings. Randy Kimmler, one of the organizers, at whose home the first Bible studies were held, said that Holy Spirit grew organically from the group's first meeting during Lent in 2005.

"We said, let's just go ahead and meet weekly for Eucharist together in the middle of the week," Kimmler recalled. "So we did that for like, I guess for a year. No one was invited in or anything, it was just, you know, done."

Attendees include a core of regular participants, and a revolving group of others. The membership of the church is directly tied to the LA Episcopal Diocese. Several of the leaders and organizers, as well as other semiregular participants, are employees of the diocese or are otherwise active in diocesan activities. Others, however, have no connection to the Episcopal church and are not otherwise drawn to Holy Spirit because of its Episcopal identity.

A number of local Episcopal priests also come to Holy Spirit on Thursdays to have their own time of worship and reflection. Often they want to try out elements of the homily they are preparing for the coming Sunday morning. Visiting priests also administer the Eucharist as a part of the Holy Spirit service.

Holy Spirit has organized its evening service into a triptych that they call "the Lord's supper in three courses." The first course allows participants to socialize with one another around food and drink. The second is a contemporary Eucharist service—where congregants stand in a circle and pass the bread, cup, and blessing to each other—and includes a time of reflection usually based on a piece of biblical scripture or other related material. The final course moves to more socializing over dessert.

Unless you knew that Holy Spirit is affiliated with the Episcopal Diocese, you probably wouldn't recognize the church culture as Episcopalian. They have intentionally styled their community as a place for non-church types to gather for spiritual fellowship and to connect with one another around service projects. Toward that end, several members of Holy Spirit launched a program to provide laundry services once a month to homeless people and the working poor. Their initiative is part of a national nonprofit Laundry Love movement that many religious as well as nonreligious groups have joined over the last several years. Holy Spirit has partnered with Founders MCC in its local Laundry Love effort.³

"I'm really glad we started to do this," said twenty-four-year-old Joey Courtney, who recently decided to enter the Episcopal priesthood. "It's a little bit more action based, and I think that's something I would definitely remember when I start in a church, is that action needs to be there and that people really respond well to it. And I think we've seen our numbers rise because of it."

Under the name "Spirit Studio," Holy Spirit sublets its rental space to support a variety of community-oriented activities, including a gallery for art showings, a twice-monthly writing workshop, a group that meets to write letters to prisoners, a Saturday morning yoga-for-beginners program, and a social gathering for local LGBT seniors. As with Founders MCC, Holy Spirit has a disproportionate impact in its community relative to its size.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk and founder of the Order of Interbeing, has said that "the next Buddha, the Buddha of the West, will come as the *sangha*."⁴

For anyone paying attention to recent reports on the changing American religious landscape, which suggest that attendance at religious services has been declining for decades, Thich Nhat Hanh's claim that the West will be the

wellspring of *sangha*, the Sanskrit term for “spiritual community,” might seem woefully mistaken.

Yet that assumption overlooks one of the most important innovations that Buddhism in the West has produced over the past several decades through the proliferation of mindfulness practices: the emphasis on “taking refuge in community.” Although psychological therapy, self-help, and personal wellbeing figure into most discussions of mindfulness, mindfulness practitioners are also actively creating moral or spiritual communities that support their individual commitments to personal growth.

The Western idea of *sangha* is perhaps most enthusiastically embraced in cities such as Los Angeles, which is often characterized, somewhat unfairly, as the poster-child for fragmented urban landscapes marked by isolation and disconnection from community. Take for instance Joshua Kauffman, who helped organize and establish the Flowing River Sangha, a community practicing mindfulness in the Thich Nhat Hanh tradition in Silver Lake. Before he and his fellow *sangha* members started meeting in their current location in a yoga studio, Kauffman drove every Saturday morning across LA from his home in the Atwater Village area to meditate with a *sangha* in Culver City. Having to schlep across LA might seem like as good a reason as any to lose one’s religion, but for Kauffman, who was supporting his recovery from a serious illness through regular mindfulness practice, it was a worthwhile commute.

“My evolution to sort of be more of a regular practitioner allowed me to move through the whole experience with a certain degree of grace,” Kauffman said. “I didn’t fight it. I didn’t struggle against it. I really focused on just being open to the experience instead of pushing against it. All of my practice during those years was really about figuring out how to, you know, to not resist and therefore to not suffer.”

Kauffman made the weekly journey for five years, interspersing his practice routine with visits to Deer Park Monastery, a Buddhist sanctuary

and retreat center in rural San Diego County. At Deer Park, Kauffman met other devoted mindfulness practitioners who were also yearning for a *sangha* in northeast LA. Kauffman was already an ordained lay member of the Order of Interbeing—which meant that he knew the rituals, chants, and form of mindfulness practices—so the group began meeting regularly at a yoga studio in their neighborhood on Saturday mornings. Leadership now rotates among the regular practitioners, which means that the appointed person gets to choose a reading of his or her choice by their spiritual teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh (known informally as “Thay” to his followers).

Attracting about a dozen practitioners from northeast LA neighborhoods including Los Feliz, Flowing River *Sangha* is one of the many hyper-local mindfulness communities that are popping up around Los Angeles. Their proliferation is a sign not only that people are seeking meditative mindfulness practices to ease the anxiety, stress, and emptiness that can accompany life in twenty-first-century California, but also that people in an age of flux and disaffiliation are eager to find new forms of meaningful community. Noah Levine, the lead meditation teacher of Against the Stream, an LA-based Buddhist meditation society, regularly conveys this desire for a community of spiritual practitioners in Dharma talks he gives at the organization’s centers in Hollywood and Santa Monica:

This kind of spiritual practice, and really all kinds of spiritual practice, is very much solitary. Meditating by yourself, inside yourself, training your own mind. . . . But the Buddha was quite clear that his teaching, that this path was a relational path. Yes, we have to all meditate for ourselves. . . . but he was insistent that we do it in groups, in community, that we do it in refuge, which means a place of shelter from some level of suffering, that we go take refuge in a community of people and that we do our individual work in a relational environment.

Speaking to an audience of about a hundred mindfulness practitioners who had come to hear him talk one evening, Levine emphasized the need for mindfulness practitioners to embed themselves within a community of other meditators, whom he referred to as “spiritual friends following the path.”

That search for a sense of self-transcendence, both through a commitment to some form of practice associated with the examined life and within a community of likeminded practitioners, is the foundation of any religious movement. For various reasons, many of the institutions that formed centuries or even millennia ago are no longer fulfilling the yearnings of the current generation of seekers. As we are finding in Los Feliz and elsewhere, that doesn’t mean that religion is dead—rather that, as in any other ecosystem, old growth must eventually die off to make room for new. ■

Notes

1. See, for example, the General Social Survey, conducted each year (with a few exceptions) since 1972. See also decennial Religious Congregations and Membership Study. Both the GSS and RCMS are available for analysis at thearda.com.
2. <http://beautifulgate.la>
3. <http://crcc.usc.edu/laundry-love/>
4. Thich Nhat Hanh, “The Next Buddha May Be a Sangha,” *Inquiring Mind* 10, no.2 (Spring, 1994).



NICK STREET



Innovation in Context

Is American Evangelicalism Really Disappearing?

by Richard Flory
February 7, 2014

Predicting the demise of American evangelicalism has become a cottage industry. Scholars, journalists, evangelical researchers and the evangelical blogosphere all agree: Whether because of declining numbers of young people or demographic shifts that favor other religious groups, the movement is declining and becoming irrelevant in American society.

Most recently, the bankruptcy and sale of California's Crystal Cathedral to the Catholic Archdiocese of Orange County has become the small story that captures the big picture. But to make the rise and fall of the Schuller dynasty the model for the larger evangelical movement ignores the particularities of the Crystal Cathedral—particularly the dramatically evolving cultural landscape of Orange County and the leadership crises that preceded the sale of the iconic building and its opulent campus. It would be more accurate to say that this institution, and not the broader movement to which it was tenuously connected, ultimately failed to keep pace in a highly competitive religious marketplace.

At its most basic level, evangelicalism is characterized by a belief in the literal truth of the Bible, a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ," the importance of encouraging others to be "born again" in Jesus and a lively worship culture. This characterization is true regardless the size of the church, what the people sitting in the pews look like or how they express their beliefs. By focusing on megachurches like the Crystal Cathedral or identifying younger leaders in the Schuller mold, evangelicalism-in-decline analyses fail to capture the diversity and innovative spirit of a wide array of individuals and groups that should be understood as "evangelical." These critiques also tend to overlook patterns of adaptation and syncretism that are typical of religious movements that are responding to changes in the broader social, economic and political culture.

While most megachurches are evangelical, not all of them are. More to the point, while many evangelicals belong to megachurches,

most of them don't. According to the Religious Congregations and Membership Study, in Orange County alone there were actually more evangelical churches as a percentage of all religious congregations in 2010 (59 percent) than in 1990 (47 percent) or in 1980 (46 percent), the supposed heydays of the megachurch-based evangelical movement. These numbers aren't the whole story, but they do suggest that it would be more accurate to say that evangelicalism is evolving rather than declining.

The evangelicalism-in-decline narrative also focuses too narrowly on white evangelicals who are not fundamentalists or Pentecostals. This suggests that evangelicalism is almost exclusively a white movement with uncontested theological content and religious practice, and that there are bright lines distinguishing evangelicalism, fundamentalism and Pentecostalism. First, there is much more overlap among these groups than that tidy distinction allows. And, second, these analyses overlook the increasing numbers of Latino and Asian evangelical congregations—ironically, many of them megachurches—that often tend toward fundamentalism or Pentecostalism. In practice these movements are much more alike than they are different, particularly with regard to bedrock theological issues and social mores as they relate to biblical teachings.

A narrow focus on megachurches (or just brick-and-mortar churches generally) also ignores the larger constellation of institutions that make up the evangelical world, such as publishing houses and media outlets, colleges and seminaries, para-church ministry organizations and other nonprofit organizations. This "evangelical religion-industrial complex" constitutes the wider evangelical movement, providing social, cultural, economic and human capital and contributing to its powerful cultural influence.

It's true that the younger leaders who are most often mentioned as the future of evangelicalism have been trained in evangelical educational institutions, publish their books with evangelical presses and make the speaking



rounds through established networks of churches, schools and other evangelical organizations. These products of the evangelical religion complex tend to represent, as one younger evangelical woman told me, an “evangelicalism 2.0” rather than a real way forward.

At the same time, there are currently several nascent “post-evangelical” movements taking shape that most scholars, journalists and institutional evangelicals still haven’t noticed. Much of this is a grass-rootsy type of organizing among younger people—a sharing of information, ideas and experiences through social media and informal gatherings at coffeehouses or more interesting beverage-consumption establishments. Because these groups deliberately operate outside of the evangelical religion complex, they don’t get the same publicity as those who have been promoted (or who promote themselves) through the established channels.

Thus there are increasing numbers of younger evangelicals who fit the profile—a belief in the Bible as the revealed word of God, a personal relationship with Jesus and so on—but who would never use the term “evangelical” to describe themselves. Instead they typically choose to identify themselves as “believers,” “Christ followers” or simply “Christian.” This ambivalence toward traditional labels is related, I’d argue, to their dissatisfaction with the evangelicalism they have inherited and the fluid boundaries between related movements, as well as to the blurring of boundaries between evangelicalism and other religious influences that younger evangelicals are pursuing. Indeed in most of my conversations with younger evangelicals, the challenge of identifying themselves religiously comes up spontaneously, indicating both a shift in the character of the movement they informally represent as well as their dissatisfaction with the options currently available to them.

Is this the end of evangelicalism? I think the answer to that question depends on what you mean by “evangelicalism.” If the term refers to the form of conservative American Protestant

Christianity dominated by white men in large churches that has had a significant sociopolitical impact—particularly in the Republican Party—over the past 30 years, then probably yes. But, if “evangelical” includes smaller, more socially inclusive, more ethnically diverse groups that own little or no real estate, that have less interest in traditional political commitments, that tend to put their faith into action through social justice ministries and that simply desire to be a “Christian presence” in the larger culture, then probably no.

Certainly there will be a remnant of the culture-war period of evangelicalism, particularly as new and newly diverse groups come into contact with each other in the public square. Yet the future of evangelicalism belongs to those who, like earlier generations, believe what the Bible says—although they will be more likely to argue that the biblical imperative for Christians is to care for the poor and to challenge unjust authorities. In this they will be attesting to their belief in the salvific power and person of Jesus. He is not simply a metaphor or archetype for these new evangelicals, as the liberal mainline would have it, nor is he a shill for right-wing politics as Dobson, Robertson and their hoary fellow-travelers believed. Rather he is a personal, spiritual and social revolutionary—much as he was for the Jesus People a generation ago. If younger post-/non-/former-/lapsed-evangelicals can avoid being coopted by the evangelical religion complex, they might be able to reform evangelicalism, by whatever name it comes to be known. ■

The Many Faces of Lord Krishna in the O.C.

by Nalika Gajaweera
June 11, 2014

It's a Friday evening in Laguna Beach, an affluent seaside city in Orange County. In a converted two-story former Baptist church a short walk from the beach, a couple of hundred lay devotees of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON), also known as the Hare Krishna movement, have gathered at the Laguna Beach ISKON temple. This special Friday evening event is in honor of Swami Radhanath, a Jewish American-born sadhu visiting from Maharashtra, India where he has resided for several decades.

As the devotees await Swami Radhanath's entrance, I sit cross-legged on the floor among the devotees. We're listening to the melodious chanting of Kirtan—the call-and-response style of singing the mantra “Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare”—accompanied by the mridanga, khartal and harmonium. On the walls around us are ornate paintings depicting Lord Krishna and his devotees. And facing us is a raised wooden altar displaying five garlanded figurines depicting the pancha tattva—the five features of Lord Krishna as they were incarnated on earth.

At first glance this Hare Krishna congregation looks a lot like the stereotype of Southern California's fringe culture: mostly young and white. But along with white women dressed in saris and dreadlocked young white men with jappa beads around their necks is a surprisingly diverse array of Hare Krishna devotees, including a significant number of men, women and children of South Asian descent. From leading the congregation in the devotional chanting to organizing the ritual practices of the temple, South Asians—many of them young second-generation Americans—figure centrally in the temple's spiritual practice.

This snapshot of the Hare Krishna movement in Southern California reflects larger socio-cultural shifts in the movement's American presence over the past four decades. In particular, the vibrant scene in Laguna Beach is a testament to how the group has adapted and innovated in the midst of claims regarding its deviant cult status

by reconfiguring itself as a broad-based religious phenomenon.

The Hare Krishna movement, or ISKON, is based on the teachings of the 15th-century philosopher Caitanya Mahaprabhu and was founded in New York City by Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who arrived in the United States from India in 1965 to propagate global missionary Vaishnavism in the West. Swami Prabhupada's visit coincided with the landmark Immigration and Nationality Act that reversed decades of exclusionary immigration policies and led to a wave of Asian immigrants, attracting in particular South Asian professionals seeking opportunities in the U.S.

At first, however, the participation of South Asian Hindu immigrants in the incipient movement was minimal. Indeed, Swami Prabhupada remained ambivalent about involving Indians in ISKON out of a concern that it would be conflated with Hinduism and its implied sectarianism. Swami Prabhupada's stated aspirations were more inclusive and cosmopolitan, though this led him at times to speak negatively about the new immigrant families' desires to achieve what he perceived as the materialistic American dream. Instead, his missionization was primarily organized to appeal to the young, mostly white hippie and bohemian culture of America at the time.

Only later, when the movement was more established, did Swami Prabhupada encourage Indians to become involved. This outreach became imperative in the mid 1970s when ISKON faced a growing threat from anti-cult activists, and stronger alliances with Indian Hindus offered ISKON cultural authenticity. Today, the growing participation of Indian American Hindus in the temple's activities offers not only legitimacy in the eyes of the public but also financial solvency, as first- and second-generation Indians, an influential and affluent segment of American society, donate to the temples.

Thus at a time when many declining mainstream Christian churches are receiving a fresh lease on life as a result of new immigrant membership, betwixt and between Indian American Hindu immigrants are serving as key cultural liaisons to facilitate ISKON's assimilation into the mainstream religious landscape. What began as a missionary movement evolved into a countercultural phenomenon and has now come to embrace both its South Asian roots as well as its cachet among successive generations of American spiritual seekers. As the Hare Krishna Tree continues to grow, the seams of these successive grafts will no doubt become increasingly more difficult to discern. ■



Meditation and Authenticity: Everything Old Is New Again

by Nick Street
August 13, 2014

A mindfulness teacher loosely associated with Against the Stream described his unconventional approach to meditation—keep a notebook close at hand to record your thoughts and feelings—as a more faithful reflection of the instructions in the Pali Cannon than many traditional forms of Buddhist practice.

In downtown L.A., an artist and urban pioneer said he was motivated to buy a small, neglected building where prostitutes and crack addicts were squatting after he had visions of a zendo and yoga studio in the space. This inspiration came to him during an intense meditation session with his teacher, an octogenarian Japanese monk living out his last days in a local monastery.

Both men connected their spiritual innovations to a quest for authenticity—an impulse to get back to the roots of the religious traditions that have captivated them.

As my colleague Nalika Gajaweera noted a few weeks ago, the popularity of meditation is on the upswing, particularly among spiritual-but-not religious “Nones” who are attracted to the practice’s health benefits as well as its compatibility with many other forms of belief (and non-belief). Two aspects of this surge of interest in meditation—the desire for an experiential or somatic component in spiritual practice and a concern for authenticity—remind me of some of the drivers of Pentecostalism’s appeal in the developing world.

A shift in focus toward unmediated individual experience, framed as a way of reclaiming the authentic spirit of a founding era, has characterized a wide array of reform movements—from the emergence of Mahayana Buddhism to the Protestant Reformation, along with countless smaller revivals, East and West, in more recent times.

Still, the experience of Samadhi—the state of undistracted awareness cultivated by meditators—isn’t the same as being slain in the Holy Spirit. Just as digging into ancient South Asian texts and having reverence for a teacher in the classic Buddhist mold is different from pining for

the fervor of Christianity’s early apostolic age.

There are resonances between these two movements, but seeing them as the same phenomenon overlooks many of the particulars that distinguish meditating Nones and ecstatic Pentecostals—not least of all the fact that each group would likely be appalled at the suggestion that its adherents have something fundamentally in common with the other!

That said, among several of the groups we’ve begun to study as part of the Religious Competition and Creative Innovation (RCCI) project, this pairing of experience and authenticity has figured variously but clearly into the mix. Which points toward an irony that I expect we will regularly encounter in our pursuit of religious innovation: Many movements that are attracting new members during this period of spiritual flux and de-affiliation claim not to be doing something new but to be recovering something vital in their tradition that has been forgotten or simply overlain with too much ritual and hierarchy.

What is the irreducible nub of Buddhism—or Christianity, Islam, Judaism or Hinduism, for that matter? Is there a common set of characteristics that mark authenticity across traditions? Are any new religious movements in Southern California discovering this magic formula? On the other hand, how much of a given tradition can you strip away before you lose its essential spirit? ■



Heart of Dharma: Comparing Buddhist Practice, East and West

by *Nalika Gajaweera*
August 28, 2014

A dozen or so Vipassana (Insight) practitioners have just ended a session of “sitting” (meditation) and discussion in one of the numerous Insight meditation centers in Los Angeles. In light of the recent death of Robin Williams, the group’s discussion turns to how Buddhist insight meditation can be a path of liberation for people struggling with depression and drug abuse. Specifically, by focusing and sustaining attention on the physical sensation of breathing in and breathing out, the practitioner learns to gradually cultivate ongoing mindful awareness and find calm and clarity in his or her life.

Some in the audience talk about challenges they face in their practice, how Vipassana meditation can sometimes conjure strong feelings of self-criticism and even self-hate. The teacher responds to these concerns by emphasizing the importance of cultivating metta, the Buddhist idea of loving-kindness, as a way of transforming feelings of anger and hatred into love and compassion. The practice begins with focusing on one’s self and then extending that loving-kindness toward those around you.

At the end of the class, as the group begins to break up, a large black bowl resembling the begging bowl of a Buddhist monk is passed through the crowd. Participants reach for their wallets, anonymously donating as much as \$10 or \$20 into the bowl. The teacher thanks the students for their contribution and reminds them that it is through this ancient Buddhist practice of dana, or giving, that the Center is able to support much of its operations, overhead expenses and teachers.

In many ways the above description of a typical Vipassana “sitting” confirms an assumption held by some practitioners and scholars of American Buddhism: that the foundational concepts of traditional Asian Theravada Buddhism like metta and dana have become repurposed and translated for new audiences in the West. Indeed, as an anthropologist with

a background in studying popular Theravada Buddhist practice in Sri Lanka, I too am struck by how differently these concepts have been applied in Los Angeles.

For instance, while indigenous socially engaged Buddhist activists in Sri Lanka have often used “loving-kindness” meditation practices as a means of responding to the problems of others, in Los Angeles, I have found that the emphasis seems to often be on how loving-kindness practice can be deployed as a mode of self-help, self-transformation and dealing with individual psychosocial struggles. Indeed, there has been a recent proliferation of scholarly publications in reputable clinical psychology journals describing the advantages of metta for recovery and trauma treatment—a testament to the growing popularity of these practices even among the scientific community as a method of stress-reduction and therapy.

The practice of “dana” has similarly evolved different meaning and significance in the two contexts. In traditional Buddhist cultures, the practice of dana, or almsgiving rituals to ordained monks, is often deeply intertwined with notions of cultivating good karmic merit in order to secure a fortunate and happy rebirth. In contrast, in many of my research encounters in Los Angeles, dana seems to be most often conceived as a simple, pragmatic way of supporting one’s spiritual institution, community or teacher through voluntary donation. Hence, while its rootedness in Buddhist ethical ideas of “letting-go” are emphasized, quite often the practice itself is stripped of the soteriological significance found in Asian Buddhist cultures.

Yet, while they may seem quite different from the outside, merit-making dana and therapeutic metta meditation do share common attributes. Both are oriented toward cultivating happiness and emotional wellbeing in oneself. So as much as American Buddhist practitioners deemphasize concerns about the accumulation of karma or merit and notions of rebirth, which are at core of the dana impulse in more tradi-

tional contexts, their focus on metta still elicits affective experiences that are similar to those that Asian Buddhists are seeking through dana. In other words, these practices are meant to ease the mind, cultivate a compassionate heart and ultimately lead to inner freedom. Metta as therapy in the West and dana as merit in Asia are both about constituting a happier, more moral self.

With all of this in mind, I suggest that the innovation of American Buddhist practitioners, diverse as they are in their various manifestations, is in fact not just how they shed the cultural baggage of rituals and rules associated with traditional Buddhism and repackage it in American cultural forms and idioms. More than this, their real innovation is in how they retain and revive elements in popular traditional Buddhism that are foremost about personal, inward experiences. So while the cultural trappings of Western teachings and Eastern traditions have significant differences, the underlying commonality is how they are both fundamentally about similar—and similarly transformative—modes of experience. ■

“While indigenous socially engaged Buddhist activists in Sri Lanka have often used “loving-kindness” meditation practices as a means of responding to the problems of others, in Los Angeles, the emphasis seems to often be on loving-kindness practice as a mode of self-help, self-transformation and dealing with individual struggles.”



The Wild, Wild West of Mindfulness

by Nick Street
September 17, 2014

Diana Winston's post-college spiritual journey was something of an anachronism. After she graduated from Brown in the late 1980s, Winston traveled to Southeast Asia, where she spent several years working with Theravada Buddhist teachers and learning classical meditation techniques in Thailand and Burma.

The broad outline of Winston's story mirrors the familiar narrative arc of numerous Western spiritual seekers—from Madame Blavatsky to the Beatles—who have embarked on Dharma pilgrimages to gain insight and pursue enlightenment. But what makes Winston's journey unusual compared to the experiences of earlier generations is the fact that she returned home to find that many of those who had traveled to Asia in the 1960s and 70s had already begun to cultivate distinctively American forms of Buddhist practice.

In other words, hybrid versions of the “exotic” spiritual practices that Winston traveled abroad to learn were already beginning to flourish in her own back yard.

She continued her studies at the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts and Spirit Rock Meditation Center near San Francisco. The vipassana techniques she learned from teachers like Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield were developed specifically to allow lay practitioners to develop meditative skills that had historically been taught only in monastic settings. As she came into her own as a teacher, Winston began to believe that the benefits of mindfulness meditation could be made available to an even wider audience if the practices were completely secularized—that is, if Buddhist ritual and iconography were completely removed from the settings in which mindfulness was taught.

“These practices are transformational,” Winston said, “but people have allergies toward religion. I thought they could be taught without the religious accessories.”

Winston's idea was in some ways an extension of the “medicalized” forms of meditative practice that Jon Kabat-Zinn developed in the 1980s. Winston got the chance to put her own theories into practice in 2004, when she became involved in designing a study on ADHD and mindfulness at UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center (MARC). Over the past decade, MARC has grown into a secular version of the expressly Buddhist monastic settings and training centers where Winston learned the techniques that she now teaches to people who may have no interest in Buddhism. As director of mindfulness education, Winston oversees retreats, courses on mindfulness practices, a teacher-training program and a weekly guided-meditation session that attracts upwards of 200 people to UCLA's Hammer Museum.

And the only Buddha statue anywhere in sight stands in her cozy office across the street from the UCLA medical school.

Though MARC's meditation programming can seem like a pretty staid affair, it's part of what Winston calls “the wild, wild West of mindfulness.” Decoupled from the ancient teaching lineages and monastic cultures that have traditionally preserved and transmitted meditation practices, mindfulness has become a booming and decidedly unregulated spiritual industry in the U.S.

“Anybody with even minimal training and practice thinks they can be a teacher!” Winston said.

Winston said that senior instructors at MARC, Spirit Rock and other established meditation centers have begun to discuss the formation of a certification board to approve training programs and license teachers. It will be fascinating to see how those involved in this effort to “routinize” mindfulness meditation define practices that, in the American context, are becoming increasingly secular.

Which raises another compelling question: Might these “religion-neutral” practices be absorbed into the culture of non-Buddhist

movements—post-denominational Christian churches, for example—that are equally eager to attract adherents from the spiritual-but-not-religious crowd? The desire for self-improvement and a preference for somatic experience over doctrine and dogma are two of the hallmarks of the “Nones,” and some evangelicals are still sorting through whether yoga is compatible with their beliefs. Board-certified, secularized mindfulness practice is arguably a no-brainer by comparison.

Future generations of American seekers may choose to retrace Winston’s steps through Southeast Asia in a latter-day search for authenticity. In the near term, innovations like the practices that Winston has helped to develop at MARC mean that the fruits of her journey as a young adult are available much closer to home. ■



Downtown L.A. Captures Pentecostalism's Past, Present and Future

Andrew Johnson
December 18, 2014

"When people ask me, 'What good can come out of Skid Row?' I tell them that the people of God come out of Skid Row!" Pastor Cue's sermon hit a crescendo as he preached on the corner of Wall Street and Winston Street in the heart of downtown Los Angeles. The rats scampering in and out of trash piles a few yards from the portable pulpit went unnoticed, and shouts of "Amen!" rose from the 60 worshippers sitting in folding chairs on the sidewalk, standing on the curb and spilling over into the street. Pastor Cue closed his homily by telling the congregation that their hope in Jesus was more significant than their pain. Then he prayed for the bread and grape juice before they were distributed for communion.

The Row, or the "Church Without Walls," is an independent congregation that has met on the same Skid Row corner for eight years. Though they serve meals after the service, it is a church. Some congregants live on the street, others in the SRO apartments scattered throughout downtown and others commute from Orange County to attend the weekly Friday night services. After the communion elements found their homes, the pastor asked if anyone needed prayer, and a handful of individuals came forward. As they relayed their prayer requests, the "Power Sisters," a small group of women in their 50s and 60s, got up from their chairs and placed their hands on the shoulders, arms and heads of the petitioners and began to pray for them in tongues.

The Pentecostal turn of the Row's worship service has historical significance: The corner of Wall and Winston is less than half a mile from 312 Azusa Street, the contested birthplace of the contemporary global Pentecostal movement. A hundred years ago William Seymour led a spiritual revival that was fueled by the same type of glossolalia prayed by the Power Sisters, and the Row shares more than just the style of prayer with America's first modern Pentecostal group. Like Seymour's church, the Row is led by an African American pastor who did not graduate from seminary, has a richly multi-ethnic congre-

gation and is the spiritual home to many people living on the stigmatized margins of Los Angeles. William Seymour might feel right at home.

But the Row is not the only manifestation of Pentecostalism operating in close proximity to 312 Azusa. Earlier this year, Hillsong, a Pentecostal church based in Australia that has made its mark on global Christianity through its music, started meeting at the Belasco Theater in downtown Los Angeles. In size and style, Hillsong's worship services look more like an arena rock concert than the Row's meetings. And Hillsong's target audience is more likely to live in DTLA's glass and steel lofts than in the Coleman tents propped up on Skid Row's sidewalks or the SROs on San Pedro Street. Despite the differences in production style and the target demographic of each church, both the Row and Hillsong can trace their roots to the Azusa Street revival.

Pentecostalism in downtown Los Angeles extends well beyond the Row and Hillsong, but this pair of groups illustrates two of the themes that emerged in CRCC's Pentecostal and Charismatic Research Initiative. First, as the number of practicing Pentecostals has grown from a few hundred to hundreds of millions over the last century, the faith has maintained its unique resonance with society's poor, oppressed and stigmatized. But in the last few decades, Pentecostalism has also made significant inroads into the rising middle-class throughout the world. Though Seymour's congregation has long since vanished, DTLA is still an important place in global Pentecostalism because the neighborhood's ongoing spiritual innovations speak to the past, present and future of the faith. ■

Happy Chrismukkah: On the Complexity of Jewish Identity

by Tobin Belzer
December 16, 2014

Back in March, I traveled to a two-day conference called “Rethinking Jewish Identity and Education” at the Mandel Center at Brandeis University. On the flight to Boston, I took a moment to browse the SkyMall catalogue, as I am typically inclined to do. Characterized as “a symbol of America’s love affair with kitsch and a respite for bored airline passengers” by the *Los Angeles Times*, the catalogue is distributed in the airplane seat pockets on nearly 90 percent of domestic flights in the U.S., reaching more than 650 million air travelers annually.

In this latest issue, I discovered an ad for a battery-operated “deluxe Hanukkah tree topper,” described as “the perfect meeting place between two beautiful holiday traditions and bound to generate smiles to all that see it.” About \$40 (plus shipping costs) buys you an 8-inch diameter, battery-operated Star of David with a “steel coil for easy mounting atop any size tree.”

I thought about my closest friend from United Synagogue Youth, the Jewish youth group that was the cornerstone of my teen years as I was coming of age in the San Fernando Valley. Dana and her family exposed me to a type of engaged and affiliated Jewish lifestyle that I had not experienced with my own, secular Jewish family. They were part of the spark that ignited my love of being Jewish, which ultimately led to my career as a sociologist of American Jewry.

About eight years ago, Dana married Matt—a kind, thoughtful and charming non-Jewish man who grew up in a holler in Kentucky. He did not convert, but has taken a strong lead as the father of their two children whom they are raising as Jewish. This does not preclude their celebration of Christmas, which features a beautifully trimmed tree. I considered whether the tree topper should be my Chrismukkah gift this year, instead of my usual ornament to add to the tree. I also wondered if any of the other social scientists of American Jewry en route to the conference had come across this cultural artifact, and if so, what was their reaction?

The ad takes a wildly different approach to the fact of inter-marriage than do many of my colleagues. Particularly illustrative of the typical attitude of Jewish scholars and leaders is a recent article commenting on the Pew Research Center’s “Portrait of Jewish Americans,” research based on a national survey of 5,000 individuals who identified as Jews. “Last year’s survey of American Jews brought dire news—rising inter-marriage, falling birthrates, dwindling congregations,” the authors—two of the most prominent voices in the field—proclaim.

It is not surprising that they view the ever-rising rates of intermarriage as a cause of the “parlous condition of American Jewry” rather than a phenomenon to be celebrated with some good old-fashioned American consumerism. What the SkyMall catalogue highlights is the disconnect between their assessment of the state of American Jewry and the lived experiences of Jews themselves.

The conference about Jewish identity at Brandeis that I attended amplified another disconnect, this time between scholars of American Jewish identity and social theorists whose articulation of identity informs my work. I understand identity to be “a complex process that produces socially negotiated, temporary outcomes formed between the interplay of self-presentation and labeling by others.”* In contrast, the majority of scholars at the conference tend to focus on understanding the extent to which subjects enact attitudes and behaviors that have been characterized as Jewish by the researcher. They typically characterize and study Jewish identity as a measurable entity that, once quantified, can potentially be increased, deepened or strengthened.

My work and life regularly bring me into contact with a variety of Jews of different parentage, ages, educational backgrounds, geographic locations and ethnicities. As an applied sociologist, I am hired by Jewish organizations and philanthropists to develop and undertake research and evaluative studies designed to help



them understand the impact of their work and to articulate recommendations, based on my findings, to help them accomplish their goals. In this capacity, I often conduct interviews with people about what being Jewish means to them. I feel fortunate to be afforded frequent opportunities to both research and relate to Jews whose understandings of what it means to be Jewish exemplify the nuanced and immeasurable quality of that complex process.

I remain close enough to Dana and her family to have the joy of regularly taking part in their Jewish life and deeply understand their preferred tone and aesthetic. It is for this reason that I decided to skip the gift of the Hannukah tree topper this year—which is just as well, as it has sold out. I suspect that as such trends continue, increasingly stylish products will be developed. Someday soon, when it's in the Hammacher Schlemmer catalogue, then I'll know it's time to buy. ■

* Ybema et al., "Articulating Identities," 2009.



Muslim Women Create a Mosque of Their Own in Los Angeles

by Brie Loskota
February 3, 2015

This post originally appeared on Religion Dispatches.

The day before the inaugural jumma, Friday congregational prayer, at the Women's Mosque of America, M. Hasna Maznavi, who serves as the project's President, was busy with last minute event planning and logistical details. Her dream to create a mosque that welcomed and empowered women was on the verge of becoming a reality: "I was anxious before but I'm not now; everything is falling into place," she told me. That optimism was no doubt bolstered by more than 225 RSVPs from prospective attendees as well as the growing media attention that their work was attracting.

Just after 1pm on Friday, January 30, women sat side by side on the cloth-covered floors of the Pico-Union Project—once a synagogue, then a church, and now a multifaith center. All but a few pews remained on the sides of the room, where observers from other religious traditions, reporters, and a few Muslim women were seated.

As Maznavi and Sana Muttalib, the Women's Mosque's co-President welcomed the crowd, the women broke into applause when Muttalib noted that "we will not be policing any bodies."

It was the policing of women's bodies and limiting of their spaces within mosques that gave Maznavi the final push to transform what she called "her life-long desire to build a mosque" into a specialized religious congregation that made women feel comfortable. After a positive, welcoming experience growing up in the Garden Grove mosque in California, her childhood mosque was renovated and the women's prayer space was moved upstairs. Maznavi was told not to pray downstairs.

"The architecture slowly trickled down to the culture of the place," said Maznavi.

After experiencing more welcoming mosques and communities like Ta'leef Collective while living in the Bay Area, she moved back to Los Angeles hoping to find a new spiritual home. During Ramadan in 2014, she sat in the women's

section of a local mosque listening to a talk. The air in the mosque was cold so she took her scarf from her head and wrapped it around her shoulders. "This woman came by and grabbed me by the shoulders," Maznavi said. "She shook me and yelled at me [to cover my hair]. She wouldn't stop and I asked her if she wanted me to leave. She said, 'yes.'"

And so, Maznavi told me: "I got kicked out of the last mosque where I felt safe."

That religious institutions are the source of spiritual disaffection is a both common refrain and a contributing factor to the growing pool of religious nones—especially among millennials.

Instead of sliding out of the door of congregational and religious life, the organizers behind the Women's Mosque have channeled their energy into a creative, institution-building endeavor, aimed, in part at stemming that trend. And it seems to have resonated. "I would hope that women who do not go to the mosque or those who don't feel comfortable when they go, will find [that this is a] place for them to go," remarked Zaria Horton, who also attends a mosque in nearby Pasadena, CA.

That is what is so strikingly unique about the work that Maznavi, Muttalib, and their collaborators have undertaken. There have been previous efforts to radically push the limits of the American Muslim community, especially around gender-inclusion—most notably Amina Wadud's and Asra Nomani's women-led mixed-gender prayer a decade ago. But the Women's Mosque consciously frames and anchors the project not as groundbreaking, radical, or revolutionary, but as an one squarely within the orthodoxy of Islam, even if that claim is contested. Edina Lekovic, who gave the khutbah (sermon) during the service, noted that there were women's mosques in ten other countries around the globe.

"It's been done before," noted Amal Al Kalla, who also attends the Islamic Center of Southern California. "Women did lead prayer in the time of the Prophet."

“We respect the orthodoxy and we also want to push it,” Maznavi said.

Los Angeles itself has long been the starting point for movements that challenge orthodox religious teaching, including historic events like the Azusa Street revival, which sparked an American wave of Pentecostalism more than 100 years ago. Today, Los Angeles is home to a large and diverse population of Muslims including recent Latino/a converts, and the children and grandchildren of immigrants and those who found Islam originally through the Nation of Islam. So it is not surprising that the Women’s Mosque was planted in LA’s fertile spiritual soil.

The inauguration of the Women’s Mosque of America is one marker of an important turning point for American Muslims, whose communal efforts have struggled during the post-9/11 cultural climate. Those behind the Women’s Mosque of America are all men and women in their 20s-40s. They have not succumbed to the suspicion or outright hostility of those who question their place in America as Muslims. Nor do they feel the need to proclaim themselves “moderates,” or to engage in self-defensive posturing in reaction to external pressure.

That in and of itself may signal a change in the way this younger American Muslim generation approaches their religion.

While these younger American Muslims are acutely aware of the shortcomings of their own religious institutions, they are not spending their energy to make a project of critiquing the faults of those places. Nor are they patiently waiting for those institutions to awaken to their needs—they are not pleading with traditional holders of authority to lead change from on high.

Instead, they are empowered by self-confidence and a sense of ownership of their identities and their religious tradition—and they are at home in the city they call their own. They are adding to the ingathering of creative energy that is creating what Edina Lekovic and others have called “a renaissance” in American Muslim life. ■

** Full disclosure: Hasna Maznavi, Edina Lekovic and Sana Muttalib were all participants in a program I advise called the American Muslim Civic Leadership Institute. I have been friends and colleagues with Lekovic for a decade.*

First All-female Mosque Opens in Los Angeles

by Nick Street
February 3, 2015

**This article first appeared in
Al Jazeera America.**

The first women-only mosque in the United States opened its doors in Los Angeles on Friday with an inaugural jummah, or prayer, by Edina Lekovic of the Muslim Public Affairs Council. The mosque is housed in a century-old multifaith worship space near downtown. Originally built as a synagogue, Pico-Union is now the home of the nonprofit Women's Mosque as well as several Jewish and Christian groups.

Even as the boards of directors at many American mosques are becoming more welcoming to women, the relegation of Muslim women to basements, balconies and other less desirable spaces in their houses of worship remains a common practice. That second-class status is the main force behind the founding of the Women's Mosque.

While a mosque solely for women is a novelty among the roughly 2,000 mosques in the United States, mosques for each sex have long flourished in other parts of the world. The young American Muslims behind the Women's Mosque are working to counter cultural practices that marginalize women, by linking their effort with established Muslim traditions and helping the disaffected reconnect with their faith. There is no requirement that worshipers wear headscarves, welcoming women "in the type and style of clothing in which they feel comfortable."

The desire to nurture that faith is what motivates Sana Muttalib, an attorney specializing in international anticorruption law and a co-president of the Women's Mosque, along with M. Hasna Maznavi, a comedy writer and director. Muttalib's understanding of Islam was shaped by a belief in women's equality from a very young age, she said. "The stories my mother taught me from the Quran were all about equality. When I grew up and realized that isn't always the reality that plays out in society, I was shocked. It really caused me to have a crisis of faith."

She said she began to rekindle her faith in law school, where she took a constitutional law class and an Islamic law class in the same term. "I reconnected with the Quran and realized what was there and wasn't there in terms of empowering women," she said. "Before I die, I wanted to help the real Islam be lived in society. I had been looking for a way to do that."

In an interview the day before she delivered her khutba, or sermon, at the opening of the Women's Mosque, Lekovic described a similar aspiration.

"In mainstream mosques, women's issues are usually a sideshow," she said. "Our intention is to help women read the Quran and interpret the scriptures and tradition for themselves. We're doing this with an eye on empowering women to serve the broader Muslim community."

Lekovic emphasized that the point of the mosque's educational programs—which are co-ed—and its monthly women-only jummah is to enrich existing Muslim American institutions rather than subvert or abandon them.

"Some of the pushback we've gotten is the idea that we're just trying to isolate women," she said. "We see what we're doing as complementary, not competitive."

Speaking before the start of last Friday's prayer, Kameelah Wilkerson, an administrator with a child welfare organization, echoed that aim. "I have a home mosque in Altadena, which I'm very involved with," she said. "I'll maintain my involvement there. But the bigger picture is so important—to give women a voice and a space to exercise that voice."

She added that she sees her engagement in both communities as part of a larger and potentially transformative relationship between the Women's Mosque and the other Muslim institutions with which its participants are connected.



“In my home community I’m a member of the board of directors,” she said. “It’s very welcoming to women, but it’s not very large, and the spaces are not equitable. I would like to see this movement energize both men and women to make spaces more equitable across the Muslim community.”

One way the new mosque is doing that is by holding a question-and-answer session about the khutba immediately after the jummah. About 100 women sat in a circle on the floor with Lekovic. For many of them, having direct access to her was an unprecedented experience. A comment from a woman who said that it was a pleasant change to be able to see and hear the person who gave the sermon without looking at a TV screen elicited cheers and applause.

Several women said they hope to see the fledgling organization transform the way Muslim institutions in the U.S. respond to broader issues in American culture.

“Mosques in America are generally very Old World,” said Sarah Usmen, who works in TV and film production. “You go there to pray, and maybe there’s a lecture about not wearing a headscarf, and that’s the range. I would love to see a lot of different projects grow out of the networks that are formed here. Whether it’s social justice projects or environmental projects—just taking faith into the real world and actually engaging society.”

The creative tension between the desire to reclaim the roots of their tradition on the one hand and to transform the contemporary expression of American Islam on the other is the primary influence for the movement behind the Women’s Mosque.

“There’s nothing really radical about having an all-female space where the people praying are all women, being led by a woman and the sermon is given by a woman,” said Ruqayya Khan, chairwoman of the Islamic studies program at Claremont Graduate University. “In fact, Islamic law stipulates that the only kind of prayer women can lead is if the congregation is all women. What happened in New York in 2005”—when the controversial scholar Amina Wadud led a mixed-gender congregation in prayers—“was much more radical and provocative.”

Still, Khan sees the keen focus on the cultivation of women’s leadership at the mosque as a subtle but potentially transformative force in American Islam.

“What is significant is the sense of women taking ownership of their religious tradition,” she said. “So the Women’s Mosque is an interesting combination of not radical and yet radical. They’re not abandoning their mosques or leaving their husbands.” But it could encourage women to take a more active part in public life and cultivate innovative thinking. “In that sense, it’s a moment to notice and a movement to watch.” ■

Mindfulness is as American as Apple Pie

by Nalika Gajaweera
March 12, 2015

“I want to deal with the chaos in my mind.”

“I need to find some stillness and clarity in my mind.”

So said two students at the first session of a six-week beginners’ mindfulness class where I have been conducting fieldwork for the Religious Competition and Creative Innovation project. As the novice meditators took turns to introduce themselves, it was clear that the other attendees shared similar motivations for signing up for the course. They highlighted reasons such as reducing stress and anxiety, recommendations from psychotherapists and continuation of meditative practices cultivated through practices like yoga. None expressed otherworldly purposes like getting on the Dharmic path to Nirvana or finding a cessation to suffering.

With all the press that the therapeutic value of mindfulness has received in the media lately, these are not particularly surprising observations. Indeed, a common refrain in such is how a practice exclusively associated with Asian Buddhist monastics has now been adapted and secularized through programs such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, pioneered by Jon Kabat-Zinn to meet the mundane concerns of middle-class Americans.

The secular turn in mindfulness is certainly significant for understanding the boom in meditation across various American cultural spaces like hospitals and classrooms. Still, I suggest that this perspective can sometimes obscure as much as it reveals. It can reify a dominant narrative about secularization at the expense of obscuring the history of mindfulness in the liberal religious currents of 19th century America.

Anthropologists like Talal Asad and sociologists like Courtney Bender have been suggesting for some time now that studies of spiritual practices should be understood genealogically in terms of the broad range of secular and religious networks and powers that shape spirituality’s contemporary manifestations. Taking their

lead, instead of tracing the roots of mindfulness exclusively to the ancient traditions of the East, what if we also explored the complex genealogy of meditation in the cosmopolitan spiritualism of American traditions?

The notion that mindfulness is a timeless traditions of the East may offer proponents a cultural caché and veneer of authenticity. But the transcendentalists, theosophists, New Thought optimists and the Unitarians also shared a commitment to ideals such as spiritual liberty, mystical experience, meditative interiority and universal brotherhood. These traditions are anchored in the spirit of Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James and Walt Whitman.

To be sure, I am not suggesting that the roots of mindfulness should be credited solely to an American liberal intellectual heritage. Rather, it’s a prompt to think of mindfulness sideways and laterally. We can move away from a singular genealogy of mindfulness towards an account of its development through the messy, sideways associations and encounters—personal and intellectual—between the American moderns and their Asian counterparts.

Historically situating mindfulness in such a manner shows American moderns’ efforts to counter the alienating forces of urbanization and scientific and bureaucratic rationalization. They turned to the “primitive” and the “pre-modern,” crossed boundaries of race and studied comparative religion for the purposes of seeking and constructing spiritual authenticity at home.

The students in the mindfulness class may think they’re seeking therapeutic answers from secularized Eastern traditions, but their practices are authentically American too. Perhaps it’s this implicit knowledge that makes mindfulness so enchanting to spiritual seekers today. ■



Ayaan Hirsi Ali Is Not the Reformer Islam Needs. Here Are the Real Reformers.

by Rhonda Roumani
April 9, 2015

To the chagrin of many Muslims, Ayaan Hirsi Ali is back on the talk show circuit, promoting her new book, *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now*.

And, for the first time, as I watched Hirsi Ali subdivide the Muslim world into three groups—rather than paint Islam and Muslims in broad brush strokes—I began to wonder whether she was finally changing her tone. For years, Hirsi Ali has labeled Islam as a religion of violence and intolerance, pointing to her personal story as proof.

So, I picked up her book, hopeful that if Hirsi Ali believes a reformation is possible, then maybe she also has a new starting point. I did find a more nuanced argument by the author. Hirsi Ali's fundamental problem is not that she's asking for a reformation. Many Muslims, too, are troubled by the rise of fanaticism; they want to halt the rise of ISIS and to limit the appeal of such groups to Muslim youth. But Hirsi Ali's language and preconditions will stall a debate about reformation from the get-go.

Hirsi Ali begins her book by dividing Muslims into three categories. She describes the "Medina Muslims" as intolerant and prone to violence—those more universally described as *Salafis*. The "Meccan Muslims" are the majority of peace-loving Muslims who she says are mostly at odds with modernity. She defines "dissident Muslims" as both unbelievers and believers who believe that Muslims and/or Islam must change.

Hirsi Ali then says that for a reformation to happen, Muslims must strip the prophet of his "infallible" nature and declare the Qur'an a man-made document. Muslims must re-prioritize this life over the afterlife in order to remove the appeal of martyrdom. They must embrace secular laws over "anachronistic" shariah laws and rid themselves of "religious police" or "politically empowered clerics." Finally, Muslims must reject the use of the sword and become a true religion of peace.

Her argument has evolved. And she even makes points that I believe many Muslims would agree with. For example, on various talk shows, she has said that theological reform must come

from within the religion itself (something that seems to run counter to her argument in her book) and that the West must align themselves with the reformers and those that respect democratic change, rather than despotic regimes like Saudi Arabia, which exports a harmful version of Islam.

But her requirements ask Muslims to denounce a religion they love, and in essence, declare themselves atheists. "Islam is not a religion of peace," Hirsi Ali declares. Such derisive language makes it difficult to take her seriously as a reformer who wants peace. Instead, it only attracts other "warriors"—those who both hate Islam and those who want to fight in the name of Islam—while alienating the "reformers" out there who have been working towards change within their own communities for decades.

If she really wanted to "reform" Islam to be a "peaceful" religion, she might start by looking to others who are challenging the status quo. But the "reformers" include people who believe that shariah can be a part of our modern world, if interpreted correctly. They are people who believe that Islam can flourish under secular governments, that Islam can be a source of justice and peace simultaneously.

I grew up with hearing the words of one such person. Dr. Maher Hathout believed in Islam, he lived Islam, and he also believed in modern principles of democracy, tolerance and love. He constantly repeated phrases like, "there is no compulsion in Islam." Even though he found Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Versus* insulting, he condemned the fatwa against him and defended his right to free speech. (He faced death threats from Muslims because of his stance.)

Hathout called on Muslims to interpret the Qur'an for themselves—to study, to use reason and to question those in robes. There is no Islam without thinking, he said.

He became an integral part of LA's interfaith community, joining forces with Jewish and Christian leaders to speak out against injustice and promote interfaith dialogue. He condemned

violence perpetrated by Muslims and non-Muslims. And he helped mentor new generations of Muslims who see no conflict between Islam and modernity.

But he did not ask to be called a dissident or a reformer. He just was one.

He passed away earlier this year and the community felt his loss deeply. But, he left behind a legion of reformers—all around Los Angeles, the U.S. and abroad. The question is how can we make these reformers' voices heard.

Hirsi Ali's book fails to recognize that the calls for reform have been going on for decades—arguably even for centuries—within the tradition itself. Reformers are tackling many subjects: What is shariah? Where is its place in the modern world? What is jihad? How does one eliminate extremism in the name of Islam and how does one make such ideologies less popular to youth? It is these debates that must be heard and discussed—by both Muslims and non-Muslims.

Here are just a few interesting people—scholars and activists—who I believe should be leading the way. They are believers who begin their critiques from a place of love and compassion, along the same lines that they understand their religion.

Khaled Abou El Fadl, professor of law at UCLA, has written a book called *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari'ah in the Modern Age*.

Intisar Rabb, a professor of law at Harvard, has written a book called, *Doubt in Islamic Law: A History of Legal Maxims, Interpretation, and Islamic Criminal Law*. Omid Safi is a professor, blogger and director of Duke's Islamic Studies Center who has written a books about the prophet called, *Memories of Muhammad* and another book titled *Progressive Muslims*.

The Women's Mosque of America (in Los Angeles) is a group of Muslim women who recently started their own mosque as a way to "uplift the Muslim community by empowering women and girls through more direct access to Islamic scholarship and leadership opportunities... The Women's Mosque of America plans to

provide programming, events, and classes open to both men and women that will aim to increase community access to female Muslim scholars and female perspectives on Islamic knowledge and spirituality."

Karima Bennouna, author of *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here: Untold Stories from the Fight Against Muslim Fundamentalism*, travels around the world interviewing a wide range of Muslims who have stood up against the Muslim fundamentalists.

Mustafa Akyol is a Turkish thinker who writes about the roots of progressive Muslim thought in his book *Islam Without Extremes*.

Khaled Latif is a NYU chaplain who has worked closely with law enforcement for years and helped to build an engaged and progressive community of Muslim youth.

Suhaib Webb is an imam who recently left Boston to join an interesting new group in the Virginia/ D.C. area called Make Space, which hopes to create a safe space of worship for all Muslims.

Shahed Amanullah, co-founder of Affinis Labs, an incubator that helps set up companies that will draw its talent from Muslim communities as a way to counteract the influence and allure of extremist groups like ISIS.

These are just a few of the reformers out there. Manal Omar, arguably another "reformer" and the acting vice president for the Middle East and Africa Center at the United States Institute of Peace, argues the fight against extremism must come from local voices, whose respective communities help to temper the lure of extremism. We must tap into those voices as we debate how to make this scholarship and messages resonate with youth. How does one affect the group that Hirsi Ali calls the "Medina Muslims"?

The work of these reformers is exciting and intriguing. And I believe they would be willing to debate anybody, whether religious or secular or an atheist, who upholds an environment of tolerance. ■

This commentary was re-posted by Salon.

What Ireland's "Yes" Vote for Gay Marriage Says About Being Catholic

by Megan Sweas
May 29, 2015

With 62 percent of Ireland voting for the legalization of gay marriage, both liberal and conservative commentators have lamented/celebrated the death of the church in Ireland this week.

"The Irish Church's failures have caused its people to choose secularism over faith," bemoaned one headline from the UK *Catholic Herald*, referencing the church's sordid sex abuse scandal.

"One wonders what it will take for Americans to become as embittered, and liberated, as the Irish," Jay Michaelson said on The Daily Beast.

Such reactions have made liberal Catholics defensive. "Many who voted 'yes' on gay marriage did so because of their faith, not in spite of it," argued Christopher Hale, executive director of Catholics United for the Common Good, on TIME.

All these perspectives have some truth to them, but are incomplete. With nearly 85 percent of Ireland still identifying as Catholic, the vote can't be chalked up to secularization. Yet only 18 percent of the Irish go to mass regularly. The vote for gay marriage embodies that disconnect, pointing to many ways that Catholics can be "Catholic."

It's too early to write off traditional conceptions of Catholicism. At 38 percent, a significant minority still voted "no" to gay marriage. Conservatives blame dissent on ignorance of the truth and beauty of church teachings. Indeed, a Vatican official who called the vote a "defeat for humanity" said, "The Church must take account of this reality, but in the sense of reinforcing its commitment to evangelization."

On the other extreme are those who are actively promoting change in the church. Catholic reform groups, which exist all around the world, offer these folks a spiritual home. LGBT Catholics also form their own communities, such as Gay Catholic Voice Ireland or DignityUSA.

"Catholics understand and live by the true values of our faith—love, family, inclusion, and honoring the dignity of all people," DignityUSA Executive Director Marianne Duddy-Burke said after the vote.

This line of thinking resonates with many Catholics. It's notable that a number of other "Catholic" countries—France, Spain, Brazil and Argentina, for instance—also allow gay marriage. In the U.S., 60 percent of Catholics support gay marriage, according to the Public Religion Research Institute, and a Supreme Court with six Catholic justices will soon decide whether gay marriage bans are constitutional.

Conservatives may be right that ordinary Catholics don't fully understand the church's teaching on sexuality, but nor do they care to learn. When feminist theologian Donna Freitas interviewed Catholic college students in the U.S. about what the church teaches about sex, they laughed in her face. The church says, "Don't do it" and "Don't be gay," they said.

These young people ignore the rote rules of the scandal-ridden church. They may agree with the church reformers, but to them, the hierarchy is irrelevant. Spirituality and sexuality are divorced in their minds. "What the church teaches about sexuality is rejected almost as a duty," Father Paul Morrissey wrote.

When Pope Paul VI re-affirmed the church's opposition to artificial birth control in 1968, it became socially acceptable to part ways with the church on issue of sexuality. "Cafeteria Catholics," a once dismissive name, pick and choose their beliefs with pride. Today, many Catholics taking communion on Sundays not only have used birth control but they also support gay marriage, and they do so without a twinge of guilt.

But this group also includes those who rarely darken the door of a church. They baptize their children and may even send them to Catholic school, but they're "Christmas and Easter" Catholics, connecting to the church through family and tradition.

Catholic religious identity is cultural as much as it is about creed or Mass attendance. But the question remains whether those who have ditched the dogma will eventually ditch their identity as well.

The American experience shows that the tension can be difficult to sustain. Forty-one percent of Americans raised Catholic no longer identify with the faith, according to the Pew Research Center. Nearly a third of American Millennials who left their childhood religion said negative teachings about or treatment of LGBT people was a factor in them leaving, PRRI found.

Some predict the Irish will follow their American counterparts out the church door, but others hope the people of Ireland will lead the institutional church in the direction of change. While the former is more likely than the latter, in all likelihood, there will always be pockets of committed traditionalists and reform-minded liberals among the cafeteria, cultural and lapsed Catholics. If Ireland has taught us anything, it's that being Catholic means much more the following the pope and his prelates. ■

“These young people ignore the rote rules of the scandal-ridden church. They may agree with the church reformers, but to them, the hierarchy is irrelevant.”



Pope Francis Has Spoken on Climate Change—Here’s What Catholic Sisters Are Doing About It

by Megan Sweas
June 18, 2015

Pope Francis says climate change is real and human activity plays a role in rising temperatures. Neither the content of his encyclical, *Laudato Si’: On the Care of Our Common Home*, nor the fact that the Pope agrees with the scientific consensus should be surprising. Nonetheless, this is the headline being repeated frequently this week.

The natural follow up question is, “What now?”

Women religious, who are often on the cutting edge of the church, point to the ways that faith can have an impact on environmentalism—and vice versa. Here are three:

1. Living simply so others can simply live

At the most basic level, ecology is a natural (pun intended) part of sisters’ lives. Their vows of poverty lead to a simple lifestyle in harmony with nature. From the days of St. Clare, women religious have taken their lead from St. Francis, the popular patron saint of ecology. While Franciscan sisters in particular have a devotion to the environment, other orders also embrace this tradition; for example, Pope Francis, a Jesuit, took the name of the founder of the Franciscans. (See *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology* by Sarah McFarland Taylor for more on the development of eco-nuns.)

“There’s a freedom in living simply,” Sister Kathy Wright told *Stir Journal*. “It’s not all about deprivation, doing without, whatever. I think to the extent that we can continue to model an alternative that is joyful... then I think there’s real hope.”

This simple lifestyle can have far-reaching effects. Wright’s Kentucky religious congregation, for instance, refused to allow a gas pipeline across its land, making the corporation suspend their development plans last year.

Sister Farm has a whole list of farms and ecological retreat centers started by women religious. Congregations plant gardens, renovate their motherhouses for LEED certification, drive hybrids and install solar panels. In 1994, Catholic sisters in the United States and

Canada set up the Sisters of Earth network, which meets every two years. Such networks can help support and amplify the individual work of sisters on social issues.

So, too, do Catholic volunteer programs, where young lay women can absorb the charism of a congregation for a year or two without taking vows. One such volunteer blogged on *Global Sisters Report* about what she learned from the community’s approach to saving water in drought-stricken California. “Widespread change begins with intentional, individual action,” she wrote.

2. Eco-justice for all

“Religious communities come into existence because of a cultural or political or historical urgency,” Sister Gail Worcelo said in article in *The Atlantic* on green sisters a few years ago. “And in our time, we see the urgency—the urgency is planetary.”

Affirming the major theme of the Pope’s encyclical, though, women religious aren’t in this work simply to save the earth for its own sake. Eco-justice puts the poor at the center of protecting creation.

Nobody embodied this idea more than Sister Dorothy Stang. Her work to save the Amazon in Brazil was directly tied to her advocacy for poor farmers. As a consequence, wealthy ranchers ordered her assassination. As John Allen noted, she could be the “patron saint” of the Pope’s encyclical.

This approach reflects a broader movement of faith-based organizations. Sisters and religious congregations will be on the frontlines as natural resources become scarcer, particularly in the developing world. For this reason, faith-based organizations from Caritas Internationalis to WorldVision have made it part of their mission not only to respond to climate-related disasters but to help the poor prepare and adapt to changing climates.

3. Embracing eco-spirituality

Nature inspires people not only to dig their fingers into the earth and fight injustices but also to ponder God.

As *The Atlantic's* story on green nuns points out, this has led some women religious away from traditional Catholicism, even as they remain a part of the church. Conservatives warn that sisters studying cosmology are promoting New Age ideas in conflict with Catholicism.

Pope Francis is releasing his encyclical in an era in which many say they feel more at home in nature than in a church. As commentators have noted, his text will challenge liberal environmentalists as much as it does climate change deniers. Yet, it's very possible that turning one's attention to our planet's health might challenge existing understandings of creation and humanity's place in it.

Ilia Delio, a leading cosmologist and Franciscan sister, recently wrote on *Global Sisters Report* that an evolution in religion might be necessary: As much as I anticipate Pope Francis's encyclical, I expect that it will spark much discussion but evoke no real change. To turn our human community in a new direction requires a new cosmological narrative which, in turn, will mean radical changes for theology, ecclesiology and pastoral ministry. If we want a different world, we must become a different church.

Pope Francis's encyclical has laid the groundwork for a new conversation about the environment. But the really "radical" (in both senses of the word) environmental work is happening at the grassroots level, with sisters leading the way. ■



Flavio Serafini/Flickr

U2, Justin Bieber and the Future of Christianity

by Richard Flory
July 1, 2015

What exactly is the shelf life of a headlining rock band and an equally headline-grabbing pastor? When I heard that U2 had summoned mega-church pastor Rick Warren to minister to them in their grieving over the death of their long time road manager Dennis Sheehan, I thought, “This is the end.”

Now don’t get me wrong, I like U2, or at least I once did. When they forced their latest album on everyone with an iTunes account, the fiercely independent band became just another shill for corporate interests.

And in Rick Warren, they summoned another corporate leader to help them in their time of need. After all, what are megachurches if not large religious corporations intent on expanding their brand in the religious marketplace? Rick Warren’s own Saddleback Church has franchise sites across 10 cities in Southern California and another four in Berlin, Hong Kong, Manila and Buenos Aires. Just like Apple, McDonald’s or U2, you get exactly what you expect when you visit, with content quality controlled from headquarters in Orange County, California.

The U2-Rick Warren relationship is hardly anything new in American Christianity. Pastors and evangelists have long courted relationships with leading musicians, actors and other culture producers as a way to extend their religious brand in secular culture, while the celebrities burnish their brand among the faithful.

In many ways, this model is still popular among a large segment of Christianity that crosses generational and ethnic lines—although not necessarily in the same congregation. One only need visit Saddleback to see the older version, or Hillsong, an Australian megachurch with outposts in 14 cities around the world, to see a newer version. At least in its New York and L.A. incarnation, Hillsong is a younger and more ethnically diverse version of churches like Saddleback. It includes U2-worthy worship performances that draw thousands of young adults each weekend.

And, Hillsong has its own celebrity component, most notably with former bad-boy pop-artist Justin Bieber counted among its members. His participation in the church’s annual conference, of course, has been publicly noted by the church, and gossip blogs have been abuzz with his friendship with its pastors.

Yet between the increasing number of people declaring they have “no religion in particular,” and the many emerging congregations that are intentionally small and community oriented, I wonder about the future of these large churches that focus on producing pop-culture oriented spiritual experience through their music and their connections to celebrities.

I recently attended a small conference celebrating 13 years of Laundry Love, an outreach/service program that has its origins in a small church in Ventura, California. The premise of Laundry Love is to provide free-of-charge laundry services for the homeless and working poor, both as a way to help them with this essential task, and to develop relationships with people they meet. What I heard at the conference was less “we’re here to help you” than “we aim to show love for love’s sake.” There was no agenda other than building a community of mutual caring.

Laundry Love demonstrates an emerging sensibility on the part of spiritual and religious people, as well as those who claim no allegiance to either, to “do something” for others simply as a way to give back and to develop a sense of community, with no strings or expectations attached. These efforts can be found in a number of places—within churches, mosques, temples and just among friends who organize themselves to “give back.” For many, this is “church,” not the buildings, music or formal programming, and definitely not the celebrities.

Most people who are involved in a megachurch will tell you that the real action isn’t in the worship performance, but in the small groups where community and relationships are built. Nonetheless, in many ways, it seems as though these emerging forms of embodied and

inclusive spiritual communities are attracting an increasing number of participants who are dissatisfied with the large, church-as-performance model. But are these different models of church really competing for members, or is something else going on that allows each to not only exist, but to thrive?

Based on several observations we've made in our research on creativity and innovation, it is clear that the mega/performance churches have a core of attenders, as do the smaller groups. But our working hypothesis is that some set of church attenders are seeking their spiritual nourishment and community simultaneously from multiple congregations. We'll be testing this hypothesis as we go out and interview people at such churches this summer.

Just as music lovers might attend a U2 concert and a small coffee house set in the span of a few days, it seems possible that at least some people who attend Saddleback or Hillsong are also attending and participating in smaller faith communities for complementary reasons. In other words, some people may need more than one church or experience in order to find what they're looking for. ■



U2 CONCERT MATT MCGEE/Flickr



Mindfulness and Science: Who's Winning the Game of Samsara?

by Nalika Gajaweera
July 14, 2015

In his podcast lecture, Jesse Maceo Vega-Frey, a young Vipassana teacher, raises concerns about the “Mindfulness Industrial Complex.” “We want to win at this game of samsara”—the cyclic existence of suffering, driven by greed, ignorance and anger—but according to the Buddha, he says, it is “a game you can’t win in.”

As mindfulness becomes increasingly popularized—and scrubbed of its religious trappings—some teachers and practitioners concerned about the unintended consequences resulting from the secularization of Dharma. Are the ethical assumptions of Buddhist traditions integrated into mindfulness practice? Are the benefits of meditative practices being co-opted to improve corporate profits of companies like Google? Most significantly, does the orientation of mindfulness toward utilitarian self-help goals ultimately contradict Buddhist ideal of liberation?

The “Dharma world” and the “secular mindfulness world,” a pair of commonly invoked terms, seem to suggest a divide between those practicing mindfulness in a secular context and those immersed in a Buddhist religious practice. But in my ongoing research on mindfulness in Southern California, I have found that there is a lot more mixing and entanglement of the people, practices and institutions involved in this meditative practice.

For instance, some teachers provide instruction in secular adaptations of mindfulness meditation at the same time as they are advancing their own meditative practices during long silent retreats in explicitly Buddhist contexts. Many of these individuals are chameleonic travelers that travel fluidly through different cultural contexts, including hospitals, secular mindfulness centers, traditional Vipassana retreats and professional conferences. Day in and day out they exchange ideas about mindfulness between senior Dharma teachers, Buddhist monks, health professionals, mindfulness teacher-trainers, university students and corporate executives, translating concepts and ideas in Buddhism into psychological terms.

Those who defend the secular (or medicalized) adaption of mindfulness claim that these innovations make the Dharma more universal and radically inclusive, introducing the fundamentals of Buddhist teachings without the “cultural trappings” usually associated with them. To them, mindfulness is a way to share traditional meditative practice with those who ordinarily shy away from anything that smacks of “religion,” as well as people who might be averse to engaging in a practice that appears to conflict with their own religious beliefs.

This defense of medicalized mindfulness equates the fundamental insights of the Buddha with the mainstream consensus in modern neuroscience and psychology. By insisting that what they do is “scientific” rather than religious or cultural, some mindfulness proponents seek to wrest authority over the Dharma away from traditional religious narratives, rendering it “open-source.” This adaptation makes mindfulness applicable to stress reduction, addiction recovery and other modern American concerns.

Yet, while this marriage between science and mindfulness is a key driver of adaptations of mindfulness as a form of self-help and personal betterment, it has at the same time become integral to the teaching of meditative practices amongst those who are skeptical of this secular development.

Indeed, I have found that while some Dharma teachers see the secularization of mindfulness as diverging from the “true” liberatory goals of Buddhism, they are still happy to draw on the prestige and legitimacy that science brings to their teaching of the Dharma. In this sense, the “science” behind mindfulness serves as a common idiom for those practicing in the Dharma and the secular mindfulness world.

Efforts to connect Buddhism to modern science are not new themes in the history of Buddhism. Early Asian Buddhist reformers of the turn of the 20th century sought to challenge European impressions of Buddhism as nihilistic, passive, superstitious and ritualistic, by

strategically employing a scientific language to translate and transform Buddhist ideas as not only rational and centered on the individual, but also embracing and surpassing Western science. The popularity that mindfulness enjoys today is in part a testament to the success of these early Asian Buddhist reformers innovative efforts to position the Dharma as consistent with “reason” rather than superstition, “empiricism” rather than divine revelation.

By readily embracing the science-of-mindfulness discourse, many of those who are concerned with the secularization of Dharma are in fact thrown into a paradox, with their practice leading into areas that the practitioners themselves often find problematic.

So if some Dharma teachers and practitioners today are finding aspects of the contemporary mindfulness development troubling, they might need to unsettle some of their most foundational inherited assumptions about their spiritual practice. Namely, that the Dharma is scientific. ■



GLOGGER/WIKICOMMONS



Why Do Buddhists Give Money in Sri Lanka, But Not in the U.S.?

by Nalika Gajaweera
October 14, 2015

During visit to observe a Los Angeles-based mindfulness group a few months ago, the teacher asked me to explain to her students the significant role that *dana*, one of the ten *pāramitā* (perfections) of Buddhism, plays in the spiritual lives of Theravada Buddhists living in Sri Lanka. Drawing both from my personal and professional experiences amongst Sri Lankan Buddhists, I offered the class an anthropological explanation of contemporary *dana*: how practices of giving alms to monks and the Buddhist institution, as well as giving aid to the poor, are inspired by ideas about good karmic merit, happy rebirth and the cultivation of an ethic of generosity.

Dana as an intrinsic good can be a hard sell to American Buddhists. Some Dharma-based meditation groups in the West struggle to encourage their students to donate money in the form of *dana* to help support their lay teachers, programs and the financial upkeep of the spaces. As a result, an increasing number of meditation centers are integrating more mainstream secular mindfulness programs into their curriculum wherein they can charge fees for courses like Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), unlike training in Dharma-based Vipassana meditation. Indeed, many teachers are finding that they are better able to support themselves as MBSR instructors than as *dana*-based Dharma gurus.

One reason for this is because Buddhist meditation has become popular among a growing cohort of Americans looking for a personal spiritual practice that is unaccompanied by dogmatic faith, hierarchies of authority and issues of religious preservation. As such, most serious practitioners of Buddhist meditation in America question patronage to religious institutions, and are doubtful about cosmological ideas of merit and rebirth integral to *dana*.

I was reminded of this issue during a recent visit to Sri Lanka when I encountered the work of a local Buddhist monk that successfully drew upon local networks of *dana* patronage to social-

ly and economically rehabilitate an underserved community in the rural province of Pollonaruwa. The story illustrates what the Dharma teacher wanted me explain to her class—that *dana* is traditionally important in the institutional sustenance of the Buddhist establishment. It also has the potential to orient Buddhists towards social work, an issue that American Buddhist communities are beginning to address.

When Abbot Pradeepavansa, who is just 32 years old, took residence as the head priest of a dilapidated and neglected village temple seven years ago, he knew he faced a formidable challenge. According to his account, Thambalavava, a village of about 210 households, had a notorious reputation as violent ghettoized village. It was a hot bed of illicit drugs and alcohol use and manufacturing, and it was informally governed by network of local gangsters hostile to the Buddhist temple, which was perceived as a competing authority figure. With only 20 percent of the village able to sustain themselves on farming and the remaining primarily relying on casual day labor, the economic prospects of the village were bleak. Neglected for decades by state government, the village had few resources. It lacked water, electricity and road infrastructure, and its schools lacked teachers and materials.

Dozens of monks had come and gone from the temple throughout the years, unable to sustain themselves in an area where few of the residents, although nominally Buddhist, attended temple or followed religious practice. Indeed, the issues this temple faced reflect broader patterns in the country. Many rural temples are closing their gates as a result of dwindling support from local communities, who have few resources to give *dana* to the temple.

Yet, as Abbot Pradeepavansa put it, he wanted to make a change in a place where it mattered. As the single monk residing in the temple, he committed himself working on what I observed as three interconnected, long-term issues: the economic uplift of the village, the spiritual development of the community, and

the sustenance of the temple, the abbot and his monastic disciples. Together, the first two would help create a robust local congregation that could sustain the temple in its ongoing social and spiritual efforts for the community. As a monk from the Amarapura Buddhist lineage or *nikaya*, the final issues fit within the broader national concern among Sri Lankan Buddhists of declining number of temples in the country.

Abbot Pradeepavansa took a multi-pronged approach with *dana* playing an essential role. First, with the support of 30 residents he befriended in the community, he systematically visited every household, inquiring about their social and economic concerns. In essence, he conducted what in modern development parlance might be called an evaluation and needs assessment study.

Second, considering the lack of local resources in the local rural area to meet these needs, Abbot Pradeepavansa sought support for his intended project by visiting cities like Colombo and begging for *dana* from house to house. Many Buddhists consider *dana* to the *sangha*, specifically the monastic community, as the utmost good karmic deed to be practiced, and that by giving *dana*, one can acquire merit and cultivate happiness in this life and in the next birth. Thus for many middle and upper middle class Buddhists, supporting social development efforts of a monk like Pradeepavansa satisfies an impulse to help the poor, while also allowing them an opportunity to gain merit by sustaining a broader national Buddhist religious community.

So far, Abbot Pradeepavansa has found support to build wells for the community, provide school supplies and books to the poor youth, establish reverse osmosis water purification plants and enhance the religious programs offered at the temple. Significantly, he has also been able to build on networks of *dana* patronage, notably by a number of Sri Lanka women, to promote a story of success and bring government represen-

tatives' attention to the community. His efforts in demanding state welfare service for the community have been well received. In the past couple of years, the government has given the village electricity supplies, a computer and Internet center and new roads. Some in the village have also received small grants and micro-loan assistance to establish their own businesses.

Meanwhile, Abbot Pradeepavansa has also ordained more than a dozen novice monks, ages 10-34, who are being given a religious education, as well as training in conducting similar clergy-led social development efforts. These efforts align with the larger mission of sustaining and developing the religious Buddhist establishment (*sasana*).

Certainly, the monk's efforts might not address the gamut of social and economic malaise the community suffers from, some of which are deep and pervasive. Moreover, my brief observations of the temple and the community may also not reflect broader problems that exist in the village. Nonetheless, what this example illustrates is the significant difference religious ideas about *dana* and their associated cosmological reflections can make in the sustenance and continuation of the religious establishment.

Today, Abbot Pradeepavansa and a growing congregation of village residents regularly conduct religious ceremonies to attribute merit to those who have given generously to his work, as well as to the village devotees. Western mindfulness practitioners today may shy away from the cosmological ideas of merit and *dana* entwined in the traditional understandings of Buddhism, but it is hard to deny their role in sustaining religious practice and a community of faith in the long term. Indeed, like Abbot Pradeepavansa, they may even find within the seemingly "traditional" practices of Buddhism innovative and creative approaches to advance social justice and engage in their own communities. ■

A Sainly Start-Up: Why Some New Churches Avoid a Corporate Model

by Andrew Johnson
October 27, 2015

Snapchat's recent deal to lease more than 40,000 square feet in Venice caused some neighbors to throw up their hands in a "there goes the neighborhood" gesture. "Run for your lives! The start-ups are coming! The start-ups are coming!" they scream as they run through the streets.

Over the last five years, hundreds of tech start-ups companies have moved into Los Angeles' Silicon Beach (think West L.A. from LAX to Santa Monica). Real estate prices in places like Venice have skyrocketed, and locals are complaining that the influx of techies has changed the composition and character of their neighborhood. In less than five years, Snapchat's estimated value went from zero to \$19 billion (yes, billion), so despite residents' complaints, the innovative ideas and investment dollars will likely keep rolling in to the shores of west L.A.

Over the last few decades, some evangelical churches have looked towards corporate America for innovative management models and growth strategies. The success of the megachurch model has served as the clearest example of this trend, as churches were built with a corporate headquarters aesthetic and megachurch pastors took on the responsibilities and budgets that resembled those of a CEO.

But just like in Venice Beach, there has been pushback from the locals. Over the last few months, I have interviewed dozens of pastors and members of small- and medium- sized evangelical churches in Los Angeles. When I ask them to tell me what their church will look like in ten years, the most common response is something like, "we hope to grow, but we do not want to become a megachurch."

Snapchat grew by following "silicon" model of innovation. The company started as an innovative idea in a Stanford undergraduate course, and the idea was developed into a marketable product inside of a Venice Beach bungalow. Users now send 700 million self-destructing photos and videos each day.

Robert Chao Romero, pastor of Jesus 4 Revolutionaries, implements a radically different paradigm of innovation than used by the silicon start-ups. He describes his church as *Rasquache*, a Spanish word originally used a pejorative term in Mexico implying poverty—something like how the word *ghetto* is sometimes used. In the last decade, Chicano artists and scholars have reinterpreted the word by emphasizing the resourcefulness of *Rasquache* projects. To Romero it simply means "doing a lot with a little."

Jesus 4 Revolutionaries (J4R as members call it) was planted with the intention of serving Christian progressive activists. J4R member Vanessa Carter describes the church as a place where "we are definitely talking about politics and we are definitely talking about Jesus."

She was drawn to the church because it offered a safe and supportive space to ask questions. "How do we be faithful to who we know Jesus to be, what we know church to be, and give fair attention to all the issues we're seeing in the world," she says. "For example, what does it mean to be an undocumented immigrant? Well, scripture doesn't call that out in those exact words, but it addresses it."

J4R holds services once a month, not every Sunday, so Vanessa calls another church home. To her, J4R is an innovative way to think about church. "I love the people there. I feel like they're kindred spirits," she says. "It will probably never be a primary church. It's not intended to be. It's meant to support people who can't find that space to talk about grassroots justice, theology and its practical application in their home church."

Snapchat's funding came from venture capitalists, so while parents of high school students may not be thrilled at the firm's success, investors have been delighted. At J4R, there are no outside investors to delight. Romero says with the *Rasquache* model, "you're not beholden to anybody. In a megachurch, the pastor has to be careful, because a rich donor might not like it."

... We can say whatever we want, hopefully guided by God and the Bible and the Holy Spirit.”

J4R doesn’t take offerings at the monthly worship services. With no budget, the Romero family opens their home for the service and relies on a shared leadership model to implement church activities. Though not always the most efficient, Romero thinks it fosters a sense of belonging. “The focus is on relationships,” he says. “We might be 20 or 30 people, but the people are there because they really want to be, and everyone’s using their gifts, as opposed to showing up and being passive.”

Though the term has Aztec origins, Romero sees *Rasquachismo* as a concept pulled straight from the pages of the New Testament. “It’s like the idea of the loaves and the fishes. I think it’s utterly Biblical: offer the few fishes you have to

God, and then God does so much... It takes a lot of time though.”

J4R is an example of how evangelicals are rethinking church by looking towards seemingly disparate sources like Chicano Studies and the slow church movement for inspiration as opposed to models and ideas that have proven successful in a capitalist economy.

Jesus 4 Revolutionaries may never “go viral” and become the next Saddleback or Hillsong, but the church is building a strong foundation by investing in strong interpersonal relationships. Another reason the church has potential to grow is because it directly addresses a growing niche of Christians who may be evangelical in their theology, but progressive in their politics. And their grassroots strategy could help them avoid angering the neighbors. ■



COURTESY OF JESUS 4 REVOLUTIONARIES

Praying for Rain in the California Drought

by Megan Sweas
November 18, 2015

**This article originally appeared in the
Yale ISM Review.**

“As an American Indian, all my life I have been cursed with the myth of the ‘Indian rain dance,’” Johnny P. Flynn wrote in *Religion Dispatches* in 2012 when the United States Agricultural Secretary, Tom Vilsack, suggested a rain dance to end a drought. “I am here to say there is no such thing. Not in my Potawatomi tribe or in any other tribe across the Americas.” Weather-related rituals, Flynn wearily pointed out—including the Hopi’s famous late summer dances—recognize the season rather than bring on the rain.

That hasn’t stopped some from trying.

On a hot September day, while wildfires raged two hundred miles to the north, a motley crew of rain dancers gathered on the lawn outside of the San Juan Bautista Mission in Central California. A few of the dozen participants claimed Native American ancestry, but most did not. They wore everything from long floral dresses to athletic shorts. Each carried a bottle of water.

Sonne Reyna, who said he grew up participating in ceremonies as part of the Lipan Apache and Yaqui tribes, instructed the group to line up facing west. They took a bit of tobacco—the messenger to the Creator, Reyna said—and tossed it into the wind. Standing at the center of the line, Reyna beat his drum and led the group in song. With laughter, each tossed water from their bottles as an offering, and then turned to the south, repeating the process in each cardinal direction. The group started holding rain dances in 2014 and promised to keep on going until California’s drought ended.

In California’s fourth year of drought, people of all types of faith are returning to their roots, adapting them, and sometimes inventing new ways to seek relief in the form of rain. “There’s something very natural about praying for good weather,” said Father Mark Morozowich, dean of

the School of Theology and Religious Studies at Catholic University of America. “It’s part of our world; we’re immersed in it. It affects us, and it impinges upon us.”

Rain dances, though, are controversial. While some native peoples, particularly in what is now Arizona and New Mexico, do have traditions around the seasons, it’s not unusual to find “New Age appropriation” of native traditions, said John Barry Ryan, emeritus professor of religious studies at Manhattan College in New York. Based on a *Los Angeles Times* article on the San Juan Bautista “rain dance,” Ryan thought this is what happened in California. “What became interesting to the outsiders is this whole notion of dance that’s going to make rain,” Ryan said. “I don’t think it respects Native American traditions.... Some Native people say, ‘They took our land. Now they want to take our rituals.’”

Native or not, weather-related rituals can raise questions about God, the world, and our place in it. Indeed, a tension exists across traditions in the way people understand what it means to pray for—and sometimes receive—rain. Some see it as a magical solution or an exercise in trusting God, while a modern understanding of climate colors others’ approach to such traditions.

The Jewish people also have an ancient connection to the land, although their homeland is far from California. Reform Rabbi Ron Stern of Stephen Wise Temple in Los Angeles agrees with Reyna that Jewish traditions come out of indigenous cultures. “As modern scholarship understands it, [Jewish holidays] are originally days that pagans recognized as holidays associated with the rain fall, and Judaism layered meaning on top of it,” Stern said.

Not long after the Jewish New Year and Yom Kippur comes Sukkot, a seven-day holiday commemorating the forty years during which the Jewish people wandered in the desert. It also marks the time of harvest in Israel. The holiday of Shemini Atzeret concludes Sukkot and includes a lengthy, poetic prayer asking God to remem-

ber the ancestors and “not keep back water.” It concludes with a phrase that is added to the Amidah, the central prayer of Jewish liturgy, every day until Passover in the spring: “You are Adonai, our God, the one who causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall.”

This line is optional in the Reform tradition. “The ancient notions of God as kind of a super-human, supernatural being that maneuvers the world are just not tenable in our day and age,” said Stern, who gave a sermon in February 2014 about why modern Jews don’t pray for the rain.

Still, if this Jewish tradition fits anywhere outside of Israel, it’s California, where a Mediterranean-like climate mirrors that of Israel, with dry, hot summers and mild, wetter winters.

The Talmud lays out a plan if the rains do not come, starting with fasts by the leaders and progressing to fasts by the community. The process is optional after the fall of the temple in Jerusalem. A few Oakland rabbis, including Rabbi Mark Bloom of the Conservative Temple Beth Abraham, decided to give fasting a try anyway, in January 2014.

Bloom understands his Reform peers’ objections—that they don’t want people thinking it’s magic—but “Sometimes you just have to let it go and realize...not everything is in our control,” he said. “In the end, it can’t hurt, right?”

After his fast, it poured rain, Bloom said.

His congregation was energized by the experience. “The mystically oriented people like that we’re actually confronting prayer head on and trying to talk openly about our relationship with God. Rationalists like it also because it talks about resources, the environment and helps us concentrate on that,” Bloom said.

The Talmud says that, once it rains, the fast should end. Last winter, a group of youth skipped over the rabbis and fasted by themselves. December was rainy, but it didn’t continue. In 2015, Bloom said, the congregation plans to adapt the ancient rules and continue its fasts throughout the rainy season.

The Islamic Society of Orange County also tied fasting and prayer into their overall response to the drought, promoting a “green” Ramadan this year. “I told the people, ask God for rain, pray for it, but don’t waste water,” said Muzamil Siddiqi, the center’s religious director.

Siddiqi led 20,000 Muslims in prayers for Eid al-Fitr, the end of Ramadan, at the Anaheim Convention Center. After the gathered faithful bowed and prostrated themselves before God, Siddiqi stood up, raised his hands to heaven and prayed out loud for rain. He summed up the lengthy prayer in a few words: “Allah, give us the rain, give us the water, good rain, beneficial rain, plenty of rain, the rain that will bring benefit to us, and will not bring any harm to us.”

The tradition comes from the Hadith, or sayings of the Prophet. During the Prophet Muhammad’s Friday sermon, somebody told him that people and their animals were suffering and dying from the lack of water. He asked the Prophet to pray for rain. The sky did not have even a speck of clouds, but after the Prophet prayed, clouds immediately appeared and it started to rain, the story goes.

As it did for rabbis, it poured for the Muslims, following the Eid prayers, setting records for July, when rain is typically nonexistent in Southern California.

Imam Mohammed Zafarullah of the Ahmadiyya mosque in Chino Hills, east of Los Angeles, saw the same storm system as a result of his mosque’s interfaith prayer event a few weeks earlier. An extension of their long-standing interfaith relationships, the mosque invited Catholic, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Mormon and Christian Scientists to perform and explain their rain prayers with them.

But when it didn’t rain right away after that service, members questioned what it meant. Zafarullah counseled humility. Muslims prostrate themselves in prayer, he explained, because “you are making yourself so humble to God: ‘We are nothing and, O God, you are everything.’”



Siddiqi agrees. “Our understanding is that God is in control of the whole world. We should always turn to God,” he said. “Whatever happens, it happens by his own wisdom, his own power and his own will. Sometimes we understand, sometimes we don’t understand.” But if God brings rain, did God also bring the drought?

Brian Malison, a pastor at Christ Lutheran Church in Visalia, California, simply isn’t sure. “I don’t know anyone who can really truly answer that question,” he said.

His church is in the Central Valley, an agricultural area dependent on snow pack from the Sierras and groundwater from wells. In two weeks this summer, fourteen wells ran dry in Tulare County. One of his member spent \$40,000 to drill a 300-foot well. Some have talked about moving to the city water grid for relief.

People may not voice their uncertainty in religious language, but the subtext is “Where’s God in the midst of all of this?” Malison said.

For Stern, that’s not a concern; the weather is the weather. Bloom, on the other hand, emphasizes our insignificant place in a huge universe. Like Zafarullah, he counsels humility.

Still another approach, grounded in biblical texts, is to explain the lack of water as a consequence of sin. “If you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today—to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul—then I will send rain on your land in its season,” reads Deuteronomy 11:13–14.

The Fountain of Love Christian Center in Pomona, California turned to this text in their prayers for the rain. “We remind him of his word,” Pastor Jarron O’Neal explained. “We go to scriptures and say, ‘Father you promised that if we repented of our sins, turned from our wicked ways, humbled ourselves and prayed, you would heal our land.’”

The passage from Deuteronomy is also in the Jewish liturgy, but it has been removed from the readings in the Reform tradition, Stern noted. Nevertheless, despite his skepticism about pray-

ing for rain, there is a sense in which he agrees with the biblical account.

“Human behavior has resulted in a failure of the rains now,” Stern said. “The Bible didn’t know it in terms of global climate change; but... now we realize we actually can affect the climate through our behavior.”

The Catholic Church has long been vocal on the consequences of climate change. Pope Francis elevated the issue as a priority with his encyclical *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, which agrees with the scientific consensus that human activity affects the climate.

In 2014, Bishop Jaime Soto of Sacramento, on behalf of the California Catholic Conference, released a set of sample prayers for rain to end the drought. Although all the prayers acknowledge human need, some also include notes of wonder and confidence:

We realize now, looking up into the clear, blue sky, what a marvel even the least drop of rain really is.... Look to our dry hills and fields, dear God, and bless them with the living blessing of soft rain.

In presenting the prayers, the California bishops drew from *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, a document of the Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace, to explain their perspective. Water is a gift from God, the document affirms, and a resource we are morally obligated to protect and share with all people, especially those who are poor. The Catholic approach balances “our dependence on the Creator” with our call “to be good stewards,” Soto said when he released the prayers.

Prayer reinforces stewardship, said Sister Anna Keim. At Ramona Convent Secondary School in Alhambra, California, just outside Los Angeles, Keim teaches water conservation to her freshman students. On World Water Day on March 19, the students gather to pray about water.

“Our language that we use is that our sister water should not be bought or sold.... It’s a gift from God for everyone,” Keim said. Cultivating

gratitude for God’s gift helps motivate action, she added. “As far as uniting Christian communities and also people of others faiths, it’s great to have that spiritual component.”

But prayers around weather also can be egocentric, as Malison noted. We ask for a sunny day for a wedding or church picnic, for example. “It’s sometimes a little capricious of us to think that God is sending us rain or sunshine in such a way as to be responsive to [our] prayers,” he said. “Plus,” he added, “I don’t know what we’d do if God all of a sudden said, ‘OK, fine. I’m going to send you four feet of water continually for the next thirty days.’”

This fear—of a strong El Niño winter bringing too much rain to California—contributes to his congregation’s uncertainty. Although another year of drought would devastate the Central Valley, flooding also could hurt farmlands, washing away nutrient-rich topsoil. The last strong El Niño, in 1997, caused 17 deaths and more than half a billion dollars in damage in California.

A day after the first rain dance of the fall 2015 season in San Juan Bautista, it poured—but not over the dry fields of Central California or the burning valleys of Northern California. The remnants of a tropical storm dumped 2.39 inches of water on downtown Los Angeles in a month when the city typically receives 0.24 inches of rain.

Scientists predict that climate change will bring more extreme weather. In California that means less snowpack, longer droughts and heavier storms. “Sometimes the answer...is not that we ask God for more of something, but that we’d ask God in wisdom to use what we have in order to be sustainable,” Malison said.

The Hadith presents another solution to the prospect of a destructive El Niño. A week after Muhammad asked God for rain, a follower came to him and asked him to ask God to make it stop. “Make it around us, not on us,” the Prophet prayed. Just as quickly as the clouds came, they dispersed. ■



Religious, Spiritual and “None of the Above”: How Did Mindfulness Get So Big?

by *Nalika Gajaweera*
January 27, 2016

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Religion Dispatches.**

The ever-growing popularity of mindfulness—from corporate boardrooms to inner-city schools—has finally made my academic interest a conversation-starter at dinner parties. “Ah, the Buddha was talking about cognitive science 2,500 years ago!” as someone exclaimed after learning about what I do as an anthropologist.

The success of mindfulness in the marketplace is largely an outcome of its emergence as a kind of self-help psychology that has allowed the practice—a derivation of Theravada Buddhist meditation—to operate in non-Buddhist therapeutic settings for not particularly Buddhist goals. Its adoption by people who describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious” has prompted much popular and scholarly debate about what is “real Buddhism” versus “mere spirituality.”

Do the contradictions between self-help psychology and the transcendent goals of the Buddhist path render the mindfulness movement inauthentic?

As a researcher I find mindfulness most significantly propagated and practiced at Buddhist meditation centers, among people who identify as converts to Western Buddhism. From learning Buddhist Pali scriptures and taking the five precepts, to participating in long Vipassana meditation retreats and learning under the tutelage of Buddhist monks, Zen priests and lay Buddhist teachers, these individuals have deep and abiding commitments to Buddhism. Yet, a theme that repeatedly emerges in my interviews and fieldwork among these groups is the notion that what they do is distinct and different from what they recognize as “religion.” For many it is part of a spiritual experience and practice, where Buddhism is at heart a rational philosophy consistent with scientific knowledge. Practitioners find evidence for this in the proliferation

of cutting edge neuroplasticity studies that legitimize the uses of mindfulness within the broader secular “integrative health” scene. Moreover, the depth of Buddhist philosophy is recognized as emerging not through dogma or religious moral proscription, but rather through personal investigation and direct transformative experience.

Many Western convert Buddhists, for instance, keep a friendly distance between their own conceptions of the core features of Buddhism and the mystical ideas of karma and rebirth that are so earnestly held by more traditional Buddhist communities.

“I don’t think Buddhism is very useful to people as a belief system,” Pablo Das, a senior teacher at the LA-based Buddhist meditation society Against the Stream, told me in the upstairs lounge of the meditation studio where he teaches in Hollywood. “It’s a philosophy. I mean there are ethical teachings; there are heart-based teachings. There are philosophical frameworks through which we’re to look. There’s a rational system of practices, mindfulness-based practices, and those transform you because you have experiences. You have direct experiences.”

In Pablo’s understanding, the “heart-based” teachings are the “truth” of Buddhism and go beyond the history of Buddhism as a “belief” system. His comments are aligned with the notion of spirituality defined as an “authentic” profoundly individual experience that comes from the heart, contrasting sharply with ideas of religion as institutionalized and formalized—and thus inauthentic and superficial.

Although my respondents imagine Buddhism to be an authentic Eastern philosophical tradition transformed into the American context through the interactions of Asian teachers and Western novices of the 60’s counterculture, its history in the West as a rational “heart-based philosophy” and not a religion are somewhat more varied and complex.

As many Buddhist studies scholars have pointed out, early Asian Buddhist reformers of the 19th century strategically employed a scientific language to translate Buddhist ideas into Western contexts. They did so to challenge European impressions of Buddhism as nihilistic, passive, superstitious and ritualistic. In embracing science, they positioned Buddhism as rational and centered on the individual. Moreover, the inviolable truths of Dharma embraced and surpassed Western science, making Buddhism superior to the colonial religion of Christianity.

The popularity that mindfulness enjoys today is therefore, in part, a testament to the success of these early Asian Buddhist reformers—from places as disparate as Sri Lanka, Burma and Japan. Their innovative efforts positioned the Dharma as consistent with “reason” rather than superstition, “empiricism” rather than divine revelation and ultimately the “spiritual” rather than the “religious.” It is also in part due to the parallel efforts of Indian gurus, such as Vivekananda, who presented yoga as an ancient wisdom tradition to help Americans cope with the stresses of western modernity.

When contemporary mindfulness proponents claim that what they do is “scientific” rather than religious or cultural, they are tapping into a complex history of colonial encounters and adaptive appropriation that goes back at least 150 years. Moreover, while the adaptability of the Dharma to the needs of practitioners in various times and places threads through this history, some contemporary scholars have nonetheless remarked on ways that these appropriations are problematic.

Robert Sharf of Berkeley has argued, for example, that seeing meditation as the defining feature of Buddhism is a recent (and mainly Western) development. And C.W. Huntington of Hartwick College notes that the ego-based process of “self-help” seems to contradict the fundamental Buddhist tenet of “no-self.”

These arguments certainly offer critical insights on what might be lost in the translations that produced contemporary mindfulness meditation. But it is hard to ignore the fact that these processes—these mistranslations and confluences—still profoundly shape my interlocutors’ understandings of the “spiritual” and have very real felt effects on their mental wellbeing. Anthropologists must determine not if a particular translation is accurate, but rather how it forms and produces people’s sense of spirituality.

How does Buddhist mindfulness, as a hybrid discourse, part homegrown, part foreign, enable contemporary practitioners to claim spirituality and reject institutionalized religion?

These contemporary interpretations that construe the Dharma as the “science of mind” offer special tools for people to explore the mind, emotions and personal experience. I believe that Western converts to Buddhism are finding in these narratives about scientific Buddhism what Vincent Rafael called the “promise of the foreign,” a means for translating Buddhism and the mindfulness movement into a properly rationalized world-affirming “spirituality.” ■



Traditional and Innovative— How Korean Buddhism Stays Relevant

by Nalika Gajaweera
February 11, 2016

South Korea has become most widely known for its rapidly growing Christian population in the recent past, but nearly a quarter of the country's population identify as Buddhist. (A majority of the entire country's population—47 percent—identifies as religiously unaffiliated.) When we went to Seoul last fall, it was thus only appropriate for our research team to get a glimpse of the diversity of Buddhist religious expression in the country and its potential innovations.

Buddhist temples in South Korea are traditionally confined to the mountainous regions of the country. In fact, Buddhist monks were forbidden to enter the capital during the Joseon Dynasty when Confucianism became the sole official religion of the state. There are, however, a few exceptions. Jogyesa temple, the headquarters of the Jogye order of Korean Seon (Zen) Buddhism, is centrally located in the bustling metropolis of Seoul. Although the temple was first established in the 14th century, the modern temple structure was founded in 1910 during the period of Japanese rule of the country.

At first glance, Jogyesa temple with its ornate temple décor, Buddhist symbols and ritualism, strikes one as emblematic of “traditional” Korean Buddhism. And indeed, this was how the temple's English-speaking volunteer guides introduced the temple to us foreign visitors. However, this idea of “traditional” belies certain key innovative efforts—both historical and contemporary—that help sustain the temple and the larger Jogye order into the 21st century among competing religious forces.

The multi-tiered stupa (pagoda) located at the center of the sprawling temple premises provides a glimpse into one strand of innovation. Buddhist pagodas are towering structures found commonly across the Buddhist Asia world where sacred relics, often of the Buddha himself or of his disciples, are kept safe and venerated. Jinsinsari, the pagoda in Jogyesa, is said to store an aspect of the historical Sakyamuni Buddha's

body gifted to the temple in 1913 by the prominent Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhist Anagarika Dharmapala. He had received the relic by the then Theravada King of Thailand. Korea was one of Dharmapala's stops on a pan-Asia tour from Japan to Indonesia.

Dharmapala's gift to the Korean temple is more than the story of the inter-regional historical ties between different Buddhist cultures and sects of Asia. It also speaks to the broader Buddhist revivalist movement in Asia at the turn of the 20th century. Such exchanges in relics and amulets helped consolidate a disparate cosmopolitan network of Buddhist centers across Asia, primarily as a response to what many saw as the erosion of the Buddhist institutional establishment due to the rising prominence of Christian missionaries in Asia.

Fast-forward a century, and we find a new dynamic of religious flux in the works, particularly the decline of Christianity in the West, coupled with an increasing interest among Westerners in Buddhist meditation techniques as a mode of relaxing and connecting with the calm and peace within oneself. Korean Buddhist institutions have been quick to keep up with these global religious trends, creating new ways to engage Westerners and young Koreans who look towards the contemplative tradition of Buddhism as a means to cope with the agitation of modern society.

One of these new adaptations is the idea of “temple stays.” Begun in 2002, temple stay programs have become one of the country's most successful tourism initiatives. Operated by the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, a temple stay allows Koreans and foreigners alike to experience—for a night or longer, depending on their preference—life as a monastic in the serene mountains of Korea. Promoted as both a glimpse into “traditional Korean culture” and as an escape from the busyness of modern city life, temple stay programs, I suspect, offer Buddhist temples a lifeline in a country that is rapidly becoming more Christian.

As one of few Buddhist temples in Seoul, Jogyesa attracts a good number of tourists. It also encourages tourists to stay at rural temples. A young Buddhist nun, who led our research team through the slow ritualistic and meditative method of drinking a fragrant cup of lotus and jasmine tea, encouraged us to attend a temple stay program to catch a glimpse into “traditional Korean culture.”

The brightly painted temple in the midst of skyscrapers isn't just a reminder of days passed; rather it is an example of how religious institutions respond to competition and religious flux with innovation. ■



Slimming the Megachurch in Seoul and Los Angeles

by Richard Flory
March 1, 2016

Yoido Full Gospel Church is the world's largest megachurch. When we visited the Seoul church one weekday morning last fall, I was struck by two things: First the church was full, but more importantly, it was full of mostly older women, with a few older men in attendance as well. The worship band and choir was very good, as were the production values.

Yet Yoido has had significant problems over the last few years. Its founding pastor, David Yonggi Cho, and his son were jailed for embezzling funds from the church, and its membership, while still a staggering 800,000, is declining. Of course, it could lose several thousand members a year and still be the largest church in the world for many years to come.

Our visit to Seoul last fall made me think about the similarities and differences in the ways megachurches have responded to change there and in Los Angeles.

As my colleague Andrew Johnson recently reminded us, Seoul is the megachurch capital of the world. It seems like everywhere we went there was either an existing, or under construction megachurch that made the efforts in the U.S. seem quite small. Yet as Sung Gun Kim, the leader of our Seoul research team has pointed out, megachurch attendance in Seoul has plateaued, and there is a growing dissatisfaction with their dominant presence and what they represent in Korean society.

Yoido's story sounds a lot like what happened at the Crystal Cathedral in Orange County, California. Founding pastor Robert Schuller built one of the first modern megachurches in the U.S. through his adept appropriation of Southern California culture, his own brand of charisma, a global media presence and large, spectacular Christmas and Easter extravaganzas.

Certainly Schuller never ended up in jail, but family squabbles over church leadership, in combination with an aging membership that was not able to keep paying for the large physical plant and the Schullers' lavish lifestyle, signaled

its demise. The church sold its property to the Catholic Diocese of Orange in 2013 and now exists as a smaller congregation in a much more modest building.

In other words, however organizationally innovative Schuller and the Crystal Cathedral once was, it stagnated and ultimately failed to adapt to changing social, cultural and religious currents.

It is clear that the current megachurch model in both L.A. and Seoul is under pressure as it tries to adapt and respond to the challenges it faces. The demise of the Crystal Cathedral and the troubles experienced by Yoido Full Gospel Church might be the future of all megachurches, but we are finding interesting innovations in different megachurches in both locations.

One answer we have seen in L.A. is the performance model exemplified Hillsong, Oasis and the like. While these churches look like other megachurches, when you visit, you realize the morning worship is the whole show—well that and the impossibly beautiful young people of seemingly all races and ethnicities, who come and enjoy the show, get a little spiritual and emotional charge for the coming week, and then scurry out to brunch or whatever else they do on weekends in DTLA. This model emphasizes celebrity and performance, with little or no larger commitment required, other than a few opportunities for small group participation, all with the goal to build or maintain large attendance numbers.

Another American approach is the establishment of “franchise” locations of established megachurches in communities that are some distance from the home church. A home megachurch rents a venue in a neighboring city and organizes a Sunday morning worship service that seeks to serve that local community. Remote services are branded with the home church logos and name, and the lead pastor's sermon is played. Think of it as quality control—you know what you're going to get at the franchise, and although it may be tailored to local tastes, it is

still the same product. The franchise model is intended to extend the reach of the home church into other communities, while maintaining and perhaps increasing its membership, all at a relatively low cost.

In Seoul, Sung Gun Kim reports that the four megachurches he is studying are taking megachurches in an almost opposite direction. The innovations in Seoul fall in primarily three areas:

1. They have eschewed owning property in favor of using the money saved to operate various community outreach programs. Both franchise and performance-based megachurches sometimes rent spaces, but the intent of the churches Seoul is to free themselves up to contribute more to their communities, rather than to expand their membership base.
2. In at least one case, the church explicitly limits the terms that the lead pastor, his staff and the elders can have. Thus the succession issue that plagued the Crystal Cathedral and caused scandal across several Korean megachurches is effectively solved through an innovation in church governance.
3. Several innovative Korean megachurches are actively “slimming” themselves, by discouraging “switching” members who come from other churches, and by increasing the requirements for membership, thus raising the bar to full participation in the church. This is in direct contrast to either the performance or the franchise models we’ve seen in Southern California, each of which have low bars to entry and participation.

Certainly the different forms of innovation are at least partly influenced by the different cultural experiences and perspectives of Americans and Koreans. American values of individualism and individual choice can be seen through both older megachurches and in the emerging performance and franchise models. Similarly, megachurches in Seoul will likely survive their current scandals because they represent a certain status among Korean Christians, and they meet what Sung Gun Kim has called the Korean “orientation to quantity rather than quality.” The desire for a bigger, more fantastic show where the church-goer is surrounded by lots of people who are there for the same experience may be the prime similarity between megachurches in L.A. and Seoul.

Yet Kim also observed an emerging trend in Korea, which we’ve seen in L.A. too: a shift to quality over quantity. As Kim told us, “Some Koreans have changed their perspective to more post-materialistic values. From their point of view, small is beautiful. Korea is also a good example of transition from materialism to post-materialism.”

Perhaps this will be the lens through which megachurches start viewing their efforts. ■



Pope Francis' 'Joy of Love' Exhortation Won't Resolve Catholic Tensions on Marriage and Sex

by Megan Sweas
April 12, 2016

This post originally appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*.

When my parents went to schedule my older brother's baptism at a Catholic church, the priest told them their baby was a bastard. Because my parents were married in the Episcopal Church, their child was, in the eyes of the Catholic Church, illegitimate.

The bastard comment became a family joke, and my father eventually brought his Episcopalian-baptized kids back to the Catholic Church. Yet, it's hard for me to ignore the fact that the Catholic Church still doesn't see my parents' relationship as valid even after 38 years of marriage. To be an American Catholic today is to live with a tension between church teachings and the beliefs born of one's daily reality.

With *Amoris Laetitia* ("The Joy of Love"), the apostolic exhortation on marriage and family life published Friday, Pope Francis asks modern Catholics to stay in this tension—and for the church to make room for them. Moral laws are not "stones to throw at people's lives," he writes, opening the door for pastors to find a way for those in "irregular situations" like remarriage to participate fully in their faith.

Passages read more like a contemporary marriage manual than an apostolic exhortation. He reflects on Paul's definition ("Love is kind...") and reminds couples to schedule dates to be alone together. "We find it difficult to present marriage more as a dynamic path to personal development and fulfillment than as a lifelong burden," Francis writes.

But the pope also insists on traditional gender roles and admonishes against sex, birth control and same-sex marriage.

That approach may not be enough to stem the decline in the church membership.

Today the lack of welcome in the church is often subtler than calling a baby a bastard. Couples planning weddings, for instance, complain that parishes care only about money and paper-

work. They lie about cohabiting to avoid being lectured. If Francis could make pastors more welcoming, it would be a significant change. Yet fewer couples want church weddings in the first place: The number of weddings in Catholic churches is today less than 40% of what it was in 1970.

According to the Pew Research Center, one-quarter of U.S. Catholics have gone through divorce, and 44% have lived with a romantic partner without being married. Fewer than half of American Catholics agree with the church that homosexual behavior, remarriage without an annulment, cohabitation and contraception are sins.

Not coincidentally, since 2007, the Catholic share of the U.S. population has declined from 24% to 21%. The Pew Research Center reports that 9% of Americans are former Catholics, and another 9% are "cultural Catholics." The church is growing in Africa and Asia, but in Latin America, many Catholics have moved to evangelical and Pentecostal churches, which preach forgiveness without all the legalisms.

In contrast to his evidence-based and science-driven encyclical on the environment, *Amoris Laetitia* ignores empirical research on gender and sexuality. A growing body of evidence, for instance, suggests that transgender identity is biological, but Francis dismisses it as "ideology." "Human identity becomes the choice of the individual, one which can also change over time," he writes.

This creates a disconnect. As Father Joseph Palacios, a sociologist and fellow with the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture explains, "If the Catholic Church says we have a faith based on reason, the reason isn't there anymore for 90% of the population."

A drastic change in doctrine couldn't have been expected. Francis leads a global church, and by empowering local clergy to discern individual situations, he avoids fracturing it over rules. But for Catholics on the edge of the church already, the progress made by "The Joy of Love"

may be too little. It will, I predict, go the way of “Theology of the Body,” St. John Paul II’s teachings on marriage and sex that also extolled nurturing mothers, masculine fathers and sex that is “open to life” (read: without contraception). It is loved by a small group, actively rejected by others and irrelevant to the lives of the vast majority.

A case-by-case pastoral approach won’t cement the tenuous relationship so many families,

mine included, have with the church.

My dad remains a loyal Catholic, even serving as a Eucharistic minister. Mom stopped going to Mass regularly. Had Francis’ welcoming words come earlier, she told me, perhaps her relationship with Catholicism would have been different. Once a bastard baby, I am now my nephew’s godmother. At his baptism, I promised to help teach him the faith, yet I remain conflicted about it myself. ■



MAZUR/CATHOLICNEWS.ORG.UK VIA FLICKR

What's an Evangelical These Days? Trump's Advisors Point to Divisions

by Andrew Johnson
June 24, 2016

Is Donald Trump the friend or foe of evangelicals?

Some argue that “real” evangelicals aren’t supporting Trump, while others attempt to explain why evangelicalism is susceptible to candidates like Trump. By meeting with more than 900 evangelicals this week and appointing an “evangelical advisory board,” Trump is at least showing his desire to connect with this voting block.

While it’s still unclear which way religious voters will fall, Trump’s choice in his advisory board—old guard, mostly white male evangelicals—is indicative of splits in the evangelical voting block that Trump has exposed. If Trump’s candidacy has given us one moment of clarity, it is that term “evangelical” is no longer a useful term to describe American Protestants. It has become a racialized, political term that is largely defined by the person using it.

In a *Washington Post* Op-ed, historian and Episcopal priest Randall Balmer employed one understanding of evangelicals to argue that the evangelical-Trump friendship was inevitable. Balmer frames American evangelicalism as a movement that has followed a singular, uninterrupted trajectory starting with the Scopes Trials in 1925 and culminating in the formation of the Moral Majority in the 1980’s, where it froze and has remained unchanged for the last 30 years.

To Balmer, evangelicalism is white, male-dominated, centered in the South and values hardline conservative politics above all else. He writes as if American evangelicals in 2016 are led by voices from the grave—and not Calvary. Balmer looks back to the 1980s and 1990s and cites evangelical culture warriors like, Jerry Falwell, Paul Weyrich and Robert J. Billings, institutions like Bob Jones and Liberty University as the leading voices in American evangelicalism.

Balmer provides important historical context. His depiction of evangelicals is not false, but it is incomplete.

In late April, I attended Q, a conference meant to provide a platform for evangelical leaders to engage with social issues like how should the church engage with Syrian refugees, transgender Christians, the Black Live Matter movement and a post-Christian America. The 1,200 conference attendees, nearly all evangelicals and mostly white, were asked to complete a pre-conference survey that asked who people would vote (of the then-five presidential candidates). Only two percent supported Trump.

The poll did not capture a representative sample of the nation’s evangelicals, (neither do the primary exit polls from Southern states that Balmer referenced) but it suggests that the Trump/evangelical relationship may be more nuanced than Trump’s assertion, “The evangelicals love me and I love them.”

One of the reasons for the disparate answers on evangelical support for Trump is because as it is used in the public sphere by media, commentators and even researchers, the term evangelical is so nebulous. Most people understand it to describe groups of a shared faith, but it is often a racial/political category dressed in religious clothing.

For example, when the Public Religion Research Institute places respondents to its American Values Atlas surveys into religious traditions, the only people who can qualify as “evangelicals” are white people. If an African-American answers the same questions, *exactly* as their white counterpart, they are not considered evangelical, but “Black Protestant.” The same goes for a “Hispanic Protestant” and an Asian-American would be tallied as “Other non-white Protestant.”

According to this survey, a non-white evangelical is a logical impossibility, something like a square circle.

If the American Values Atlas surveyed Newsong LA, the evangelical church I attend in Los Angeles, only a handful of members would be classified as actual evangelicals. The congregation is around 50 percent Asian American, 30 percent African American, 10 percent white and

10 percent Latino. I would be considered “evangelical” according to this survey, but the pastor would not, the worship leader would not, nor most of the Sunday school teachers.

Trump’s candidacy did not bring about the crisis of evangelical identity, it has been brewing for years. In 2008, a team of Evangelical leaders published “An Evangelical Manifesto” to address the “confusions and corruptions that attend the term *Evangelical*” and create a theological as opposed to political gravitational center to organize the faithful. The document was signed by many, but never gained traction. The wording was too inclusive for some, the steering team was not diverse enough for others and many politically active evangelicals thought they were being targeted by the document’s deliberate move away from the culture wars.

One of the reasons the Manifesto failed to coalesce evangelicals into a cohesive group was because the term itself is unable to capture the change in socio-demographics and institutions in American Protestantism over the last three decades. Another reason is that Christians, especially those under 30, are not lining up to be called evangelicals. Precisely because of the social, cultural and political baggage inherent to the term, many are adopting identifiers such as “Jesus Follower,” “Biblical Christian” or “Committed Christian” instead of “evangelical.” They want to identify themselves as people who are committed to Jesus, adhere to core Protestant Christian theological principles, but are not inspired by the politics, or social campaigns of the Moral Majority or by religious leaders like Jerry Falwell Sr. or Jr.

Trump hopes that an “evangelical advisory board” will help him this November, but this campaign strategy and those chosen as representatives of the “evangelical” community seem anachronistic. What it does show is that it is time for a new vocabulary to talk about Protestant Christians in the United States. ■

“Many Christians, especially those under 30, are resisting the term evangelical. They want to identify themselves as people who are committed to Jesus and adhere to core Protestant Christian theological principles, but are not inspired by the politics, or social campaigns of religious leaders like Jerry Falwell—Sr. or Jr.”



How to Solve the Difficult Problem of Adding ‘Muslim’ to ‘American’

by Rhonda Roumani
October 31, 2016

**This post originally appeared on the
Los Angeles Times.**

In mid-September, my 6-year-old daughter ran into our living room and literally started jumping for joy. “Baba, it’s a miracle!” she told her father with delight. “‘Peg + Cat’ has an ‘Eid Mubarak’ show. They’re talking about ‘Eid Mubarak’ on TV!”

My husband texted my daughter’s reaction to family members and Muslim friends. When I got the message at work, I felt a moment of happiness and just as quickly a moment of sadness that such a simple event was a novelty for her, and that, at 6, she understood its rarity.

That evening our friends came over and we all watched “Peg + Cat” together—thirty- and fortysomethings riveted by a PBS kids’ show about a girl named Peg who tackles math problems with the help of a sarcastic, self-deprecating cat.

As a parent, I’ve always loved the show. The way it teaches math—story-driven and creative. The way it’s drawn—on graph paper, with whimsical, bright colors. How funny the cat is. But, most of all, I love that the main character is a girl. She’s not the sidekick; she’s the one who identifies the problem and solves it.

This episode was called “The Eid al-Adha Adventure,” and Peg was doing a great job portraying this holiday, which marks the end of the annual hajj pilgrimage. Peg and Cat sang “Eid Mubarak,” or “Happy Holiday” in Arabic, as they explained how Eid al-Adha is about giving to those in need. They figured out how to divide different sized meatballs into equal portions, and then they took the meatballs to a soup kitchen.

But the show’s message went even deeper. Eid al-Adha is a festival of sacrifice, and Cat, at first, didn’t want to give up any of those meatballs. On top of that, charity is intentional. When Peg and Cat discovered that a soup kitchen

patron, Mac, had missed his lunch, they took an extra step and sought him out. “So say ‘Eid Mubarak’ on each and every day,” Peg, Cat and Mac sang, “You’ll never solve a problem if you look the other way.”

The adults were as gratified by Peg and Cat’s adventure as my daughter was. One friend was almost in tears. I couldn’t stop smiling. It was a sweet, simple expression of what Eid al-Adha means to *us*, on kids’ TV, as a matter of course. Such a moment of complete cultural acceptance is something Muslims don’t experience too often these days.

And it was short-lived. That evening, a bomb was detonated in New York City. The next day, police captured a man with a Muslim name. And, once again, we felt a heavy, familiar mixture of frustration, anger and fear.

This year’s election has been something of a referendum on our faith, on my people. I am the daughter of Syrian immigrants, though, unlike the many refugees who are leaving Syria now, my parents came on much more pleasant terms.

Still, I learned to carry the weight of world affairs when I was growing up. My generation of American-born Muslims defined ourselves in the shadow of the Iranian hostage crisis (I was 5). Then came the downing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Scotland, the fatwa issued by the Ayatollah Khomeini against Salman Rushdie for his book “The Satanic Verses,” and the bombing of Marine barracks in Lebanon. I was keenly aware of all of these events. I knew that the word “Islam” was being used to describe them.

Now my daughter’s generation has an even more difficult path ahead. Many Americans want a diverse, multiethnic, multireligious country. But others are threatened by the country’s changing demographics. The level of anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence today is unprecedented. A 2015 YouGov/Huffington Post poll found that 55% of Americans hold an unfavorable view of Muslims.

I grew up attending the Islamic Center of Southern California, a mosque in Los Angeles that was unapologetically Muslim and American. Surrounding mosques called us sellouts because we didn't believe in segregating the sexes. Our leaders promoted a distinctly American Muslim identity. We were taught that we had the best of many worlds at our disposal, and we were raised to stand up for justice, help the needy, build understanding and make our country—the United States—as great as it could be.

This is the Islam and the America I believe in. This is the Islam and the America that “Peg + Cat” modeled. And this is what I try to pass on to my daughter.

It's not easy. How do I explain to her that just this week police arrested a man for stockpiling weapons and threatening the very same mosque that I grew up in? I know it's only a matter of time before hard truths shatter her innocence. And yet it's my job to make sure my daughter sees a bright future for herself.

For now, I'm just happy that “Peg + Cat” is helping out. ■

“I grew up attending the Islamic Center of Southern California, a mosque in Los Angeles that was unapologetically Muslim and American. We were taught that we had the best of many worlds at our disposal, and we were raised to stand up for justice, help the needy, build understanding and make our country—the United States—as great as it could be.”



Resistance

Evangelicalism: Same as it Ever Was—Or Is It?

by Richard Flory

October 22, 2014

Nobody ever said religious innovation was easy—either as an undertaking in the context of a religious community or as the subject of a scholarly investigation.

For one thing, creative and innovative activity within a religious group is not always self-evident. And members of a community that is intentionally developing new ways of doing old things can disagree about what counts as innovation and what options are out of bounds. In fact, many of the people we've talked to as part of our Religious Competition and Creative Innovation project are hesitant to call what they are doing "innovative" since that implies that they and other members of their community are actively working toward some sort of foundational religious change. On the other hand, some true innovators are defending their innovative programs and ideas against traditionalists in their own ranks.

One pastor said that he was "surprised" that we would consider his church "innovative and creative" since it had recently undergone what he called a "fundamentalist uprising" that felt like a "long season of 'Survivor'."

Yet religious change is inevitable, even within groups that claim they "never change," which would mean (in their view) forsaking historic traditions that are inseparable from their identity.

What drives innovation and change within and between religious groups? To date, we've visited and interviewed leaders and members from more than 30 congregations in Southern California that, from our perspective, are pursuing their religious and spiritual goals in innovative and creative ways. It wasn't until this past weekend, however, that I started thinking about forces that actively work to inhibit innovation, creativity and change.

Brian Houston, the senior pastor of Hillsong Church, which has a new church plant in downtown L.A., was reported to have said that his church was "having an ongoing conversation"

about same-sex marriage. Hillsong, which has 30,000 members worldwide, produces music that is played in churches around the globe—making Houston, and Hillsong, an important voice in the evangelical and Pentecostal worlds.

But in those worlds, at least until the recent past, a recognized leader who doesn't unquestionably oppose any acceptance of LGBT equality will inevitably receive denunciations from almost every quarter. This is nothing new, as evangelicals (and their early 20th century progenitors, the fundamentalists) have long patrolled the boundaries of their movement to ward off wayward beliefs, practices and behaviors. Moreover, they have frequently mobilized to punish any organization that chooses to blur these boundaries.

This is why Andrew Walker, director of policy studies for the Southern Baptist-sponsored Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, excoriated Houston and condemned Hillsong as "a church in retreat." The day after Walker's screed appeared, Houston published a response and clarification on the Hillsong website, stating that Hillsong's "biblical" position on gay marriage was unchanged.

Still, all of this is unfolding in the context of greater acceptance of LGBT individuals in general, and in particular within evangelicalism, suggesting that evangelicals are no longer speaking with one voice on LGBT issues (including gay marriage). Surveys show that support for same-sex marriage remains a minority position within evangelicalism, even among younger evangelicals. Yet there are increasing numbers of evangelicals who are publicly acknowledging both their gay or lesbian sexual orientation and their commitment to remain "evangelical."

Walker argued that evangelicalism can't change and still be evangelical, and that evangelical theology can't accommodate gay marriage and the acceptance of LGBT identities and relationships. But since there is no "Pope of evangelicalism," you can't get kicked out of the movement (regardless of the many public procla-



mations about what constitutes an “evangelical” in good standing), so it remains to be seen how this issue will ultimately play out.

Which leads to the question: How do religious groups manage the change that they will inevitably experience? Over its long history evangelicalism *has* changed: Evangelicals were at the forefront of the anti-slavery movement in the 19th century, became defenders of racial segregation in the mid 20th century and are now (at least in some quarters) re-emphasizing a socially engaged spirituality—something that, in 1947, noted evangelical theologian Carl F.H. Henry decried as having been lost by evangelicals.

Will the scope of the ongoing process of change eventually expand to include the recognition and acceptance of LGBT individuals (and

their relationships) within evangelical institutions? Can the boundaries of “acceptable” beliefs and behaviors continue to be as effectively policed as they have been in the past, given the multiple and often competing forms of authority that we all encounter? And what kinds of change can evangelicalism, or any religious movement, undertake and still maintain its “authentic” religious identity?

Innovation has become a cultural buzzword—almost to the point of losing its original meaning (think of the fate of the word “awesome,” for example). Still, there are plenty of religious groups that are innovating. And the fact that it is often painful and frequently messy makes religious innovation all the more worthy of study. ■

**Generational Differences in Support for Same-sex Marriage
Among Republicans and White Evangelical Protestants**

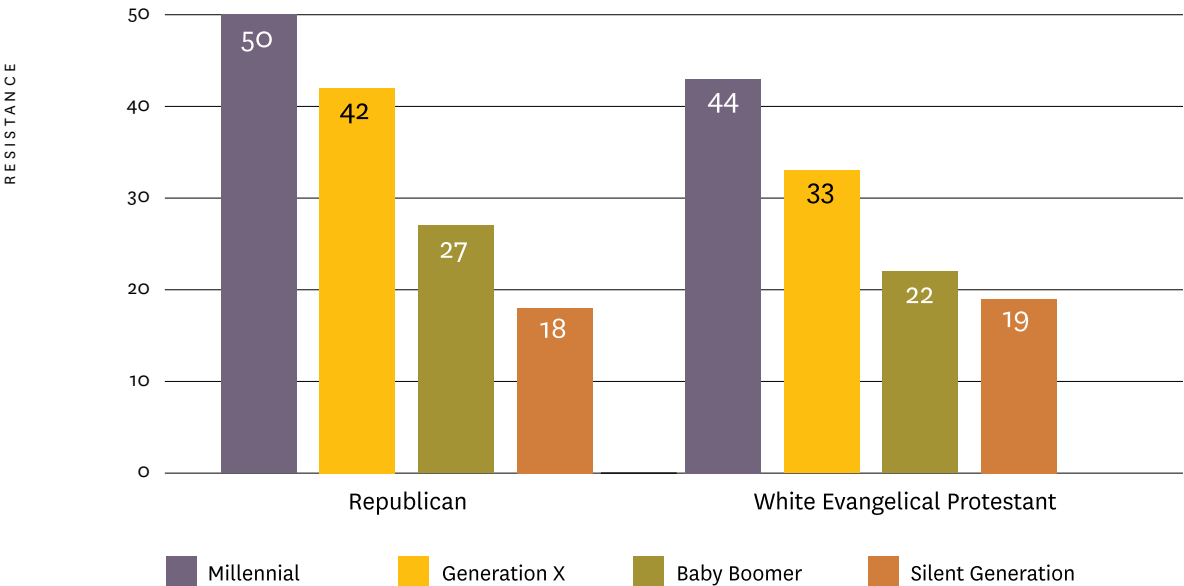


Chart and survey data from the Public Religion Research Institute.

Do Government Regulations Get in the Way of Doing Good After a Disaster?

by Brie Loskota and Richard Flory
April 21, 2015

**This post was originally published by
Zócalo Public Square.**

Any time now, Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti is going to announce whom he has hired to be the city's chief resilience officer, the person in charge of increasing the city's ability to recover from man-made and natural disasters. This is part of a larger global initiative by the Rockefeller Foundation to promote the importance of having a civic officer dedicated to coordinating disaster relief—and, more broadly, to aid in the formulation of civic responses to chronic destabilizers like unemployment and inadequate transportation infrastructures.

This is a good move, but we have one important piece of advice: Inviting and facilitating the contributions of non-governmental organizations, and more specifically faith communities, that are willing to assist during a disaster should be at the top of this person's agenda.

We have studied the evolving landscape of religion and religious institutions in the civic sphere of Southern California for more than two decades and we have seen the untapped—or thwarted—potential of these groups in helping communities respond to emergencies and more slowly unfolding disasters. Why haven't governments better recognized the potential of these faith-based groups? As we saw in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which happened 10 years ago this summer, communities of faith can be the core of an effective response. We can't just leave disasters to government agencies, which showed us how spectacularly they could fail.

The rhetoric around the contribution of faith-based groups to public life is glowing. Faith-based nonprofits have had explicit opportunities to receive government grants for the provision of social services since President Bill Clinton's time when he added "Charitable Choice" provisions in his welfare reform legislation. At the time, the federal government

was responsible for most social services, but responsibility has steadily devolved from federal and state governmental agencies to local authorities, faith-based groups, and other NGOs. The movement gathered some steam during George W. Bush's presidency as more people denounced what they considered an over-reliance on government social service programs in favor of a bigger role for private service organizations—in particular, faith-based "little armies of compassion." The emphasis on moving social services to the non-profit, and particularly the faith-based sector has only increased as government budgets for social services have dwindled.

But on the ground, we've seen that even when public officials are willing to work with these groups, the law often gets in the way of the aspirations and plans of these congregations and organizations to contribute more to the welfare of their communities.

For example, when we interviewed Patrick Dougherty, the relief ministry leader at Calvary Chapel, Burbank he spoke of his church's desire to expand its feeding program with the explicit goal of becoming a larger contributor to the community in the aftermath of a disaster. Their efforts focused on renovating and expanding their kitchen to enable them to increase their capacity from 4,000 to 20,000 meals per day in the aftermath of a disaster. Contractors initially estimated the project would require an expenditure of \$100,000, but after talking with public officials, leaders of the congregation realized that permits, licenses, and code upgrades would cause the cost to skyrocket to approximately \$2 million. The price was too high and the expansion was abandoned.

In another case, a mobile food trailer purchased by Khalsa Peace Corps, which until recently was located just off Robertson Blvd. in Los Angeles, ran into several costly snags. Three months after its purchase, but before the trailer was delivered, new regulations required a new floor and stove burners.



KPC had planned to park the trailer at their own newly renovated kitchen facility, where the mobile kitchen would be cleaned, serviced, and stored each night. This arrangement is allowed for food trucks affiliated with restaurants. But the L.A. County Public Health Department said that exemption wasn't going to apply to KPC and the organization had to use a specially designated commissary lot, where they would have access to cleaning and parking services.

Ravinder Singh Khlasa, the founder of KPC, estimated that this requirement would cost \$3,500 per month for the cost of gas, driver, and the rent of the commissary space itself. The money need to comply with the requirements from Public Health represented 1,500 fewer meals that KPC would be able to provide each month. Rather than reduce the number of meals, Ravinder decided to move his operation to another city and county.

These may sound like extreme cases, but stories like these were related to us in several interviews. The message that many faith communities hear is that it is better to fly under the radar or not talk to some government agencies because they seem to be more interested in shutting down operations and assessing fines rather than assisting these organizations in their critical efforts to serve the public, whether during a disaster or in their daily operations. While this may not square with the perspective of public agencies, which doubtless have their own reasons for putting these restrictions in place, the perception of faith communities is that government can be a significant obstacle to doing good in the public arena.

The City of Los Angeles has been convening faith groups in its emergency operations center for two years, but that's not enough. In the near term, the new chief resilience officer must streamline the cumbersome regime of licenses, codes, and other restrictions that create a chilling effect on the enthusiasm, creativity, and resources of faith groups.

This is not an impossible task. The City of Chicago, under the leadership of Mayor Rahm Emanuel and with funding from Bloomberg Philanthropies, worked to reduce city licensing requirements by 60 percent for businesses, not simply for non-profits or faith-based groups. We believe that if this is possible in a city like Chicago, which is notoriously run by special interests and aldermanic fiefdoms, it is certainly achievable in Los Angeles. ■

Could Pope Francis Change Hearts and Minds on Immigration on a Global Scale?

by Megan Sweas
June 11, 2015

This article originally appeared on Washington Post's Acts of Faith blog.

A few months into his papacy, Pope Francis took his first trip out of Rome to Lampedusa, the Italian island through which many migrants enter Europe after a treacherous journey across the Mediterranean.

Noting that shipwrecks of migrant boats happened "all too frequently," Francis blamed "the globalization of indifference."

"We have become used to the suffering of others. It doesn't affect me; it doesn't concern me; it's none of my business!" he said.

The homily served as the first of many challenges to Europe to respond to migrants with compassion. For all of the excitement over the Vatican's renewed diplomatic role under Francis, though, the pope has struggled to exert his influence on the international crisis in the Vatican's backyard.

While many world leaders have called the immigration crisis a "moral issue," the pope's message of hospitality also requires a personal "conversion" through meeting migrants and opening one's heart. This may be both the greatest strength and weakness of his pleas.

As European leaders debate what to do with the migrants coming ashore in Italy, the immigration crisis reveals the potential and limits of the so-called Pope Francis effect.

Since Francis's visit to Lampedusa, the death toll on the Mediterranean has risen dramatically. Before his July 2013 visit, 40 migrants had died at sea that year. This year, more than 1,800 have drowned.

Francis's moral leadership is often credited with compelling the Italian government to start Mare Nostrum, its search and rescue mission launched after an October 2013 shipwreck that killed more than 360 off the shore of Lampedusa. The program succeeded in rescuing more than 150,000 migrants.

But Mare Nostrum ended in October 2014. Only the loss of more than 800 lives in a single shipwreck on April 19 spurred European leaders to expand the funding (though not the mandate) of Triton, the border patrol operation that replaced Mare Nostrum.

Francis also has spoken out about the plight of migrants who survive the journey, often ending up on Rome's streets as they attempt to start over in Italy or move on to Northern Europe. In a speech to the European Parliament last fall, he noted that the lack of a unified asylum and integration system leads to "particularistic solutions ... which fail to take into account the human dignity of immigrants."

In Italy, the reception system is overwhelmed. Even before migrants started arriving by the thousands, the system rarely led to integration or employment. Immigrants often end up homeless or in informal housing, sometimes abandoned buildings. They face racism on the job market and on the streets.

Revelations of corruption in the reception system show that Italy's "welcome" isn't exactly what Francis has in mind in terms of hospitality.

The European Commission recently released its plan to distribute 40,000 asylum seekers in Italy and Greece to European Union member countries over the next two years. The plan follows a proposed quota system to welcome 20,000 refugees across the E.U. Many countries oppose both plans, which are up for approval this summer. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, for instance, told the European Parliament that the quota system was "absurd, bordering on insanity."

The commission can force most E.U. members to comply, but refugee resettlement plans may only serve to provoke greater anti-immigrant sentiment across Europe. Many migrants, meanwhile, will continue to bypass the official system and travel to their desired destination, to the distress of Europeans concerned with terrorists coming ashore.



In the midst of Europe's political theater, Francis has consistently asked policymakers and the European public to see migrants as "men and women like us, our brothers seeking a better life," as he said after the April 19 shipwreck.

After the pope's Lampedusa visit in 2013, Fabrizio Cicchitto, then a senior member of Silvio Berlusconi's former People of Freedom party, accused Francis himself of encouraging immigration and said the pontiff should restrict himself to preaching.

Even when Francis frames the issue in secular, humanist terms, though, he is preaching. On the one hand, papal exhortations and the church's lobbying efforts, which take place at both the national and international level, are grounded in the church's practical expertise working directly with migrants.

"The welcome is written into the DNA of the church, and because the church is like that, Pope Francis is now pope," Monsignor Giancarlo Perigo, general director of Fondazione Migrantes, which coordinates the Italian bishops' work on immigration, told me last fall.

By many estimates, the Catholic Church operates half of the services for migrants in Italy. In 2014, the Jesuit organization Centro Astalli, alone, saw 34,000 migrants come through its doors for housing, health care or food.

Francis followed his trip to Lampedusa with a visit to Centro Astalli. It was one of many times that he has met and listened to refugees, practicing what he preaches.

"It's important for the whole church that the welcome of the poor and the promotion of justice are not entrusted only to 'specialists,'" Francis said then.

Catholic charities in Rome and Sicily report a papal-driven boost in volunteerism and donations—from people of all faiths and none. Oliviero Forti, director of immigration at Caritas Italiana, the church's charitable arm, told me that Francis has allowed the organization to focus on providing services instead of justifying them.

But while 84 percent of Europeans evaluate Francis favorably, western Europeans largely say that religion doesn't play a positive role in their daily lives.

Particularly in southern Italy, the sheer immediacy of the crisis amplifies the "Pope Francis effect." Where the influx of migrants is slower and less dramatic, though, the pope's message of hospitality remains abstract.

Policy, meanwhile, will work only alongside a genuine shift in public attitudes toward solidarity.

When Francis went to Lampedusa, he was addressing not only to the local community, but also to the world, Daniela Pompei, head of immigrant services for the Community of Sant'Egidio, a Catholic volunteer organization, told me.

"We would like this tragedy to not remain something in Italy but to be felt in the heart of Europe, like a wound," Pompei said. "But we haven't managed to do so yet." ■

Reporting for this article was supported by a fellowship from the International Reporting Project.

What the Fight over Allah Says About the Future of Evangelical Christianity

by Richard Flory
January 11, 2016

**This post originally appeared on
Religion Dispatches.**

When Professor Larycia Hawkins of Wheaton College publicly announced her solidarity with Muslims by wearing a hijab through the holiday season—and stated that Christians and Muslims worship the “same God”—the school put her on “paid administrative leave.”

And now comes the news that Wheaton is moving to terminate her employment.

Beyond the issue of theology, Hawkins’ story reveals that signaling human solidarity with people of other religions is the latest in the long line of perceived threats to evangelical America. Placing Wheaton’s response to Hawkins’ words and actions within the history of those threats helps observers to understand how evangelicalism has evolved over the last 100+ years, and what that might mean for the future of Christianity in America.

Wheaton and other evangelical colleges and seminaries serve as central organizations within the evangelical ecosystem.

They both reflect and model evangelical theology, various social-moral expectations, and in general, the correct evangelical social, political and cultural perspective. Further, theology for evangelicals is only partly about belief.

In reality, theology functions to set evangelicals apart from any sort of belief, ideology, cultural expression, political movement, etc., that doesn’t fit into the way that evangelical leaders and their constituents want the world to work.

Through their many rules and guidelines, evangelical schools embody the codification of all of the fundamental fears and desires of the evangelical world. Tracking schools’ responses to what they perceive as threats—not only to their evangelical beliefs, but to their understanding of what American culture should be—reveals the history of how evangelicals view themselves and American culture.

In the early 20th century, evangelical fears tended to revolve around keeping the “fundamentals of the faith” distinct from an emerging “modernist” Christianity, which centered around a more “scientific” approach to faith.

One of the main reasons that evangelical Bible Schools and colleges were established was to fight against this new form of rational Christianity—one that subjected biblical and theological claims to scientific inquiry rather than to literal interpretation. Thus, for example, evangelicals rejected claims of the evolutionary origins of the world, or that humans were not special creations of God. One step on the slippery slope of this sort of theological reflection would ultimately lead not only to the end of Christianity but also the end of American culture—or at least the American culture that the mostly white, middle class evangelical world preferred.

By World War II, the concern had broadened to the control of gender and sexuality. New rules were created, governing how and where men and women could interact and dress. Women were required to “cover up” so as to not tempt men with their sexuality, a force that apparently rendered men helpless.

By the 1970s, what we now call LGBT issues were listed in all the school rule books—homosexuality was simply not an acceptable identity for evangelicals, or for anybody else. Also in the 1970s, rules governing the presentation of self were significantly extended to exclude any form of dress that was considered “counter-cultural.” No hippies were allowed: with their long hair, beach flip-flops, jeans and beards.

By the 1990s, “postmodernism” was the primary enemy, with entire evangelical academic careers dedicated to fighting against this relativistic threat to Christianity and American culture. And by the early 2000s, as some faculty members and students began to convert to rival Christian traditions such as Orthodoxy and Catholicism, these were deemed officially incompatible with “true” evangelical Christianity.



These kinds of rules have come and gone over the years, some added, others removed as the tide of time and custom has ebbed and flowed. Long hair and beards became acceptable. Women were allowed to wear pants (even shorts!) instead of dresses, and to teach religion-themed courses (not theology, it must be noted, but Christian education, which was presumably more closely linked to their role in the home as mothers and teachers of children).

As these rules have changed over time, we can see which threats were deemed less important than other, emerging threats. For example, one Seminary in Southern California has long held a prohibition against women being trained to be church pastors. Recently however, with the rise of a new threat related to Title IX and LGBT rights, faculty members are now rethinking the prohibition against women pastors in order to regroup and mount a defense against inclusion of LGBT individuals. They argue for being able to discriminate against anybody and anything that doesn't meet up to how they think the world should work. And this argument, of course, is always framed as a theological issue.

Professor Hawkins represents a threat not only to evangelical theological claims about God, but also to Wheaton's organizational authority. As such, she represents a threat to Wheaton's existence.

Not only is she not a member of the theology faculty—always the preferred and dominant voice at evangelical schools—but she is also, as Wil Gafney has noted here in RD, an African American woman making a theological claim in a predominantly white and male religious system. Her statements threaten the theological and cultural status quo: she embodies “the other,” both ethnically and now, religiously, despite her eloquent arguments to the contrary.

In sum, the threats that evangelical schools perceive have shifted somewhat over the last 100 years, but the pattern remains: evangelicalism knows what it is by fighting against what it is not.

Take its enemies away, and evangelicalism loses its identity and reason for being.

In my view, focusing narrowly on the purported theological issues that are being raised in the Wheaton College/Professor Hawkins case misses the bigger picture of what the response means for evangelicalism more broadly. Of course, this doesn't help the many individual faculty and staff members who have been fired, or students who have been kicked out of school for expressing thoughts that may appear to contradict the accepted orthodoxy. And make no mistake, many lives have been ruined in the name of theological purity. Professor Hawkins is just the latest casualty.

But things are changing within evangelicalism. Evangelical schools are facing decreasing enrollments and a declining pool of religiously acceptable students. Other evangelical institutions (such as megachurches) appear to be carrying on as usual, but they are showing signs of stress. Memberships have plateaued over the last several years, and some megachurches are seeking new ways to appeal to younger people—yet younger people continue to leave evangelicalism in large numbers. (Younger folk don't generally switch traditions within Christianity, but instead they often adopt “no religion in particular.”)

These changes are as much demographic and cultural as they are theological. For many younger evangelicals, the diverse world they inhabit is simply not the monochromatic world that evangelicalism tries to maintain, making the entire evangelical world less inviting for them.

If I were to predict a future for these schools, and evangelicalism more broadly, it would look something like this:

Evangelical schools will continue to find threats that provide a foil against which they can define themselves and their view of Christianity and America. Expressing solidarity with people of another religious tradition—Islam in this case—is only the latest in a very long list.

1. Owing to a shrinking pool of “true believers” who can support and attend these schools, many will go out of business over the next 20 years.
2. The reduced number of evangelical colleges and seminaries will retrench and become more aware of policing their cultural/theological boundaries, doubling down on their more restrictive impulses.
3. Because of a general lack of hospitality and care and concern for “the other”—whether theological, gender, class or ethnic—evangelicalism overall will become even more white, straight and politically and religiously reactionary...
4. ...which will result, in turn, in even greater numbers of young people defecting from the religion they grew up in. Most will then claim no religious identity (even though they may still believe in God), while a few will move on to other Christian traditions, and fewer still will seek out other religious expressions.

But, this future is yet to be written. If evangelicals want an alternate future, they might take seriously something that Professor Hawkins has written in her “theological response” to the leadership at Wheaton College. As she reaffirmed her fidelity with Wheaton’s doctrinal statement, she maintains that it is because of her commitment to its ideals that she is “compelled to address all human beings as my ‘brothers and sisters.’”

Not a bad application of Christian theology, and one that evangelical institutions at their best have done. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the trend at these important evangelical institutions. ■

“Things are changing within evangelicalism. Evangelical schools are facing decreasing enrollments and a declining pool of religiously acceptable students. Other evangelical institutions (such as mega-churches) are showing signs of stress, and younger people continue to leave evangelicalism in large numbers.



A Crisis of Integrity in Seoul, the Megachurch Capital of the World

by Andrew Johnson
February 9, 2016

Seoul, South Korea is the “Megachurch Capital of the World.” Not only is Seoul home to the largest known Protestant church in the universe, Yoido Full Gospel Church, the city has more residents who attend megachurches than any other city in the world. Runner-up Lagos, Nigeria has fewer than half of the 825,000 megachurch members in Seoul. But the rapid Protestant growth rates have transitioned to a slow decline, which in part have led to a dramatic rise in the number of Korean Catholics. One reason may be that Korean megachurch have forgotten their pasts.

“While in Rome, do as the Romans,” so while we were in Seoul last fall, we ate with metal chopsticks and took a tour of Young Nak Presbyterian Church located in the geographical heart of the city.

With 60,000 members, Young Nak is one of the largest churches in Korea and is one of the largest Presbyterian churches in the world. Kyung Chik Han, who died in 2000 and remains one of the most influential and respected figures in the history of Korean Christianity, founded the church. He is widely considered the “Billy Graham of South Korea.”

Young Nak’s stunning sanctuary and the enormous campus in one of Seoul’s most expensive neighborhoods stands as a far cry from its humble origins. Han started the church in 1945 with two dozen refugees from Soviet occupied North Korea. In the 1940’s and 50’s, Koreans living north of the 38th parallel flooded Seoul, arriving with not much more than the clothes on their backs. Han embraced the growing refugee community and built his church with the mission of serving the poor, widows and orphans. He sought out those living on the margins of South Korean society and used the church’s meager resources to set up shelters for war widows and orphans. As the church grew from a handful of North Korean refugees to thousands of members, they replaced their temporary tents with a bricks

and mortar. As pastor of Young Nak, Han became a prominent figure in global Christianity. He helped to start World Vision and in 1992 Han won the Templeton Prize for his life’s work.

The final stop on our tour of Young Nak Presbyterian Church was a small museum erected in Han’s honor. One of the museum’s exhibits held all of the pastor’s worldly possessions upon his death: a winter hat, cane, glasses and a few books. The exhibit stood in stark contrast to the multi-million dollar megachurch that housed the museum. After his wife died and he retired, Han lived very simply in a cabin owned by the church. His choices to give away the million-dollar Templeton prize, not accumulate any personal wealth and not handoff Young Nak to his son were symbolic acts. Today Han’s meager possessions encased in a small glass case serve as his final three-point sermon to his fellow Korean Christians. Han’s posthumous message is simple. First, Christian leaders should be humble even if they win global awards. Second, pastors should not use their positions to accumulate personal wealth, and finally, the church is not a family business to be passed down like an inheritance to one’s children.

Han’s final sermon has proven to be a prophetic warning to Korean Protestant leaders. Sung-Gun Kim, professor of sociology at Seowon University, said that it explains, in part, why Protestant church growth is stagnant and Catholic Church membership is on the rise in South Korea.

“Scandals involving money laundering and squabbles over church succession have added to the damage. They have left the Protestant church in a state of weakness leaving the Catholic Church looking ‘more Christian’ by comparison, especially among younger professionals. Some ordinary Koreans, specifically young Buddhists, watching the scandals of the Protestant church, have found their way into the Catholic ranks. In addition to this, many Korean believers (especially Protestants in big cities) have migrated to the Catholic Church.”

The Catholic Church has doubled its share of the population, from 5 percent of all South Koreans in the 1980's to 11 percent of the country.

The Protestant church is facing difficulty in South Korea for some of the same reasons the Catholic Church is currently in crisis in Europe, the United States and Latin America. The lesson I took away from our trip to Seoul is that for religious groups, integrity matters. If Protestant leaders want to stem the tide of decreasing membership in South Korea their number one priority should be restoring the integrity of the church. The legacy of Pastor Kyung Chik Han may provide an idea of how to start. ■



Change Is Happening in the Catholic Church, Just Not on Holy Thursday

by Megan Sweas
March 24, 2016

**This post originally appeared on
On Being with Krista Tippett.**

Even when I feel disconnected from my faith, Holy Thursday draws me to church. The call to follow Jesus' example and wash one another's feet speaks to me, a marginal Catholic more interested in service than doctrine.

I was not impressed, though, when the Vatican announced that the Holy Thursday foot-washing ritual would be open to women. The move merely codified a common practice—even Pope Francis has washed women's feet—and not a terribly innovative one at that.

Still, change is happening in the Catholic Church: laypeople are increasingly taking on the work of washing feet every day. A real revision in the Holy Thursday ritual would reflect this trend.

In the Catholic Church, change often happens from the bottom up, with the hierarchy eventually providing a stamp of approval. The U.S. bishops, for instance, approved women's inclusion in the foot-washing ritual in 1987. In doing so, they acknowledged that the practice already had "become customary" over the previous decade or more.

As a layperson who works for the U.S. bishops recently told me, the hierarchy doesn't react to anything until there is a groundswell.

And since the Second Vatican Council, there has been a groundswell in lay Catholics taking on leadership in the church, whether in hospital systems, high schools or parishes.

According to the Center for Applied Research on the Apostolate, nearly 40,000 lay ecclesial ministers work in U.S. parishes, and 80 percent are women. At one Los Angeles parish, I've heard parishioners referring to a woman as their "pastor." She has not replaced the priests, but by running the parish's day-to-day operations, she frees them to focus on other ministries.

This phenomenon isn't just American. In the developing world, the ratio of Catholics to priests is much higher than in the U.S., and one priest may oversee multiple communities led by laypeople.

The Archdiocese of Chicago is moving in that direction, recently announcing a reorganization process in which some parishes will close. Patrick Reardon, a member of a lay advisory group, sees it as an opportunity for laypeople, religious sisters or brothers to run parishes.

"Welcome to ... the brave new world," Reardon said. "There's so much talk about wanting more of a role for women, more of a role for married people in the church, and this is built into the reorganization."

The Vatican newspaper recently suggested that rules prohibiting laity—and women specifically—from preaching could change, too. Many priests already skirt the restrictions, saying a few words about the gospel reading before introducing a layperson to give a "reflection" within "his homily." The Rochester diocese had lay preachers for decades.

Such developments irk conservatives, who fear encroachment on the male priesthood. Bishop Robert C. Morlino of Madison, Wisconsin, for instance, banned women from the foot-washing ritual until Pope Francis' recent announcement, and he told priests that they still don't *have to* include women or even perform the ritual at all. Some parishes in his diocese don't allow female altar servers, and in 2009, he fired a lay minister whose dissertation argued for gender-inclusive language in liturgy.

Meanwhile, Women's Ordination Conference argues that these developments don't go far enough. Only *male* priests can wash feet, it said after Pope Francis' revision. Debates about the priesthood, however, do not eliminate the need for—or the good of—an involved laity.

“The commandment to fraternal love binds all the disciples of Jesus without any distinction or exception,” Archbishop Arthur Roche said in a on the foot-washing changes.

The Holy Thursday ritual could underline this idea.

When I was young, my parish opened up the foot-washing service to everyone. One by one, we’d have our feet washed and then turn around to wash the feet of the person behind us. Even at a young age, the ritual was profound, instilling in me the importance of showing “the tangible love of our neighbor,” as Roche said.

The gesture speaks not only to Catholics who dedicate their lives to ministry, but also to those of us on the edge of the church and even to non-Catholics. After Pope Francis’ U.S. visit last fall, L.A. Voice held an interfaith foot-washing service in which anyone, from ministers to former gang members, could wash feet.

Every year, I return to Holy Thursday mass hoping to rediscover this empowering symbol of church. I typically leave uninspired.

This year, I plan to attend an Episcopal church’s foot-washing ritual where everyone participates. Perhaps it can motivate me to be a more active Catholic. ■



The Public Sphere

The (Next) Fire Next Time

by Richard Flory
December 3, 2014

As I watched nationwide protests flare after the grand jury's decision not to indict Officer Darren Wilson of Ferguson, MO, I couldn't help thinking that despite the progress Americans think we've made in the evolution of our racial consciousness, we really haven't progressed much at all. In my lifetime I've witnessed—among other upheavals—the 1965 Watts riots, the 1992 civil unrest in the wake of the Rodney King beating trial and now the aftermath of Ferguson, all the result of the killing or assault of an unarmed African American man by white police officers.

I witnessed firsthand the relationship between police and young Black men when I taught school in South Los Angeles in the early 1980s. On multiple occasions I was asked to verify to LAPD officers that young men from the school (or a sponsoring church) were students or members, and that they had a “legitimate reason” for being where the LAPD had observed them. Despite the fact that I clearly did not live in the neighborhood, I had the power to legitimate the presence of these young men at the school or church solely because I was a white man.

The role of religious groups in these events has been well documented, most notably in the aftermath of the 1992 upheaval in Los Angeles, where key figures in the faith community took the lead in developing partnerships and coalitions with a diverse set of faith and community organizations to “heal L.A.” Yet as necessary as those efforts were (and continue to be) for the mending of the social fabric of Los Angeles, they were reactions to events that were decades in the making—the desperate actions of people who felt powerless in the face of state-sanctioned discrimination and violence.

Implicitly acknowledging the persistence of such forms of injustice, several of the churches we've been observing as part of our religious innovation project have taken a more proactive stance in their approach to serving the communities in which they are located. These churches have intentionally grown themselves as ethnically and socioeconomically diverse congregations in order to reflect their social context, provide meaning for local individuals as well as families and serve the neighborhoods around them.

The number of multi-ethnic churches has grown steadily, if not dramatically, over the last decade or so. This partly represents the experiences of the mostly younger members of these churches, at least in Southern California: They have grown up in very diverse neighborhoods, their schools are mostly integrated and their friends are as likely to be Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim or Sikh as they are to be Christian. Yet we are seeing a further expansion of these efforts to establish and grow multi-ethnic, economically diverse congregations that are intentionally “planted” in communities where these groups might not otherwise interact and the needs of the less fortunate are going largely unmet.

On the other hand, these churches usually promote fairly traditional forms of Christian theology and historical consciousness—for example, while actively opposing same-sex marriage is typically not part of the agenda, few of these congregations are open to performing gay or lesbian weddings. Rather, they intentionally seek ways to put their beliefs about Jesus and his message into practical action in response to important but relatively uncontroversial issues related to racial and economic injustice. These efforts range from the usual addiction-recovery, feeding and basic healthcare programs to the establishment of community centers for tutoring children and educating adults, “social enterprise” projects to provide jobs and work training that can lead to better employment opportunities.



Are these hyper-local, service-oriented groups charting the course for future faith communities? Only time will tell, but in my view the success of these churches is due in large part to their ability to tap into the basic desire of people to help and serve others, and simultaneously to provide innovative ways for congregants to fulfill these desires. If they are not revolutionizing Christianity, they are at least beginning to address forms of injustice that many churches have ignored in the past—and that seem likely to be with us for some time to come. ■



WILLIAM ELDON WILLIS/FICKR

The Gay Sex Worker Who Defied Sharia Law in Banda Aceh to Organize

by Nick Street
June 12, 2015

**This post originally appeared on
Global Post.**

JAKARTA, Indonesia—Faisal Riza started as a sex worker in one of the riskiest possible places for any kind of transgressive behavior: Aceh, a semi-autonomous region of Indonesia that has been governed by sharia law since 2001.

“In my opinion being a sex worker is fun,” Riza said. “When I get a client, I get money. But it’s also difficult to be a sex worker, especially when you get violence from the police.”

Prostitution and homosexual activity are illegal in Aceh, the only one of the country’s 34 provinces in which Muslims and non-Muslims alike are subject to a conservative interpretation of Islamic law.

But Riza and several friends formed a group called Violet Gray to promote sexual and reproductive health as well as HIV prevention in Banda Aceh, the provincial capital. The remote area—on the northern tip of Sumatra, roughly 800 miles from Jakarta—had gotten Internet access just a couple of years earlier.

Riza studied agribusiness in college, but through his work for Violet Gray he began to realize his talent for networking and community organizing.

He quickly expanded his advocacy network and became a local representative for Organisasi Perubahan Sosial Indonesia (the Organization for Social Change, or OPSI)—an Indonesian human rights initiative focusing on the welfare of sex workers.

In 2012 he moved to Jakarta to work for OPSI at the national level.

“My main goal was to increase my capacity as an organizer,” Riza said, adding that the threat of caning for having gay sex also factored into his decision to leave Banda Aceh.

Last year the government of Aceh province passed a law that punishes anyone caught engaging in homosexual behavior with 100 lashes with a cane.

“Now that I’m in Jakarta, I’m not affected by sharia law,” Riza said. “I can freely express myself.”

Transplanting himself from Banda Aceh to Jakarta was clearly a good move for Riza. His demeanor is pixieish, but he looks a bit older than his 37 years. He speaks about the lively community of friends and fellow activists he has made in the capital with the heartfelt appreciation of someone who has had to live a big part of life in the shadows.

Apart from Aceh and a handful of other conservative local jurisdictions, consenting relations between partners of the same sex are legal in Indonesia. But unlike sexual freedoms in most of the Western world, LGBT rights in Indonesia aren’t based on the notion of individual liberty.

Instead, they’re a byproduct of the country’s distinctive constitutional ideals of equality and religious harmony.

Indonesian political culture is religiously pluralistic rather than theocratic or secular. Although belief in God is enshrined in the country’s constitution, there are six officially recognized religions, and the country has nurtured numerous institutions that serve to balance competing religious interests. The most prominent of these groups are Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (commonly known as NU), two of the largest Muslim NGOs in the world.

Together they claim roughly 60 million members and provide social services like secondary schools and health clinics throughout the country. They also play important and surprising roles as unofficial advocates for the rights of Indonesian minority groups, including LGBT people.

“In a private capacity, NU and Muhammadiyah are supportive,” said Dede Oetomo, founder of Gaya Nusantara, Indonesia’s oldest gay rights group. “Academics on the left of NU have even written that Islam is not against homosexuality. But they haven’t issued official positive statements about LGBT rights, and the right wing is worried about same-sex marriage.”

According to Oetomo, the influence of the two groups reaches into the highest echelons of Indonesian government.

"A secretary of the cabinet [of Indonesian president Joko Widodo] hails from the NGO world," Oetomo said. "He's a secular person, a Muslim, and understands that human rights are universal. But he can't make a statement on behalf of the president. There's a lot of don't ask, don't tell."

Oetomo also said that thwarting legislative initiatives to criminalize gay sex at the national level—the last such measure, proposed in 2003, failed decisively—is an aspect of the NGOs' broader, ongoing opposition to conservatives who want to "Arabize Indonesian Islam."

"Like with gay people," he said, "they may not issue a statement that they support Shiites in Indonesia (a religious minority in the Sunni-majority country), but they do."

That support is often most apparent at the local level, where Indonesia's relatively weak central government and corrupt judicial system provide opportunities for reactionaries, often enriched by Saudi money, to harass groups that are offensive to orthodox Sunni sensibilities. This harassment includes forcing the closure of mosques that belong to the Shia and Ahmadiyya sects, denying building permits to Christian groups, allowing agitators to disrupt LGBT gatherings and forcing nonbelievers into hiding.

Creating a counterweight against those socially conservative and theocratic forces unites Muhammadiyah, NU and surprising array of interest groups, including LGBT rights advocates.

"We still have to be careful because of hard-liners," said Riza of OPSI. "Sometime if we have a meeting or movie screening they try to stop our activities. But our organization has lots of allies. For example, we have a partnership with legal aid organizations that work other LGBT groups and also with atheists and religious minorities."

One of those organizations is LBH Jakarta (the Jakarta Legal Aid Institute). Rizka Rachmah, an officer in LBH Jakarta's international pro-

gram, said that the alliances among unbelievers, religious minorities and LGBT people were not so surprising in the Indonesian context.

"The common cause is they [officials in local and national government] don't acknowledge these groups," Rachmah said. "We believe government should not intervene in religious rights, belief or sexual orientation. The government should give protection, but they're involved in persecution."

Unlike the United States and Europe, where Muslim minorities, atheists and LGBT rights advocates are often at odds with one another, the shared experience of injustice has forged a uniquely Indonesian set of alliances among those groups.

"Some of the networks of allies made a forum that invited all minority groups to talk about all the discrimination they face," said Rachmah. "They found many similarities and wanted to work together. There's a real emotional solidarity with these communities."

Indonesia's half-century of dictatorship ended in 1998. While organizations like OPSI and LBH Jakarta have formed since then to speak on behalf of marginalized people, the downside of losing the authoritarian version of Indonesian religious and political harmony is that every faction is now trying harder to make its voice heard above the rest.

"Because of democratization, the bigots have also become louder," said Dede Oetomo. "In a way that's the price you have to pay for an emerging democracy."

Still, as Faisal Riza knows, having allies to protect the freedoms in a democratic society makes it easier to put up with the noisy bigots.

"I am a Muslim, I am gay, I am a sex worker," said Riza. "Here I can practice Islam and go to every mosque. If I get a partner, I will stop being a sex worker. That's my goal." ■

How a Pentecostal Law Professor Has Helped Reshape Nigerian Politics

Nick Street
April 1, 2015

**This post also appeared on
The Washington Post Acts of Faith blog.**

I met Yemi Osinbajo, Nigeria's vice president-elect, two years ago, during the annual convening of the mammoth Holy Ghost Congress at Redemption Camp near Lagos. Back then, Osinbajo—a law professor and former attorney general of Lagos State—was supervisor of social responsibility projects for the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Nigeria's largest and wealthiest Pentecostal denomination.

At the end of May, Osinbajo will be sworn in as the second highest-ranking public official of Africa's most populous country and its largest economy. What prognostications can I make about his potential contributions to the new administration, based on my impressions from that meeting?

The theme of that year's Holy Ghost Congress—"Signs and Wonders"—threaded through sermons, healing services, ecstatic prayer sessions and an altar call that stretched to half an hour to allow time for would-be converts to make the kilometer-long trek from the back of the main Redemption Camp structure to the enormous stage at the front. Like many other homegrown Pentecostal denominations in Nigeria, RCCG preaches personal prosperity and promises supernatural intervention in the lives of people suffering from poverty and illness—powerful enticements for citizens of a troubled country whose population has swollen from 45 million to 170 million since 1960 and where the median income is about \$500 a year.

When I was introduced to Osinbajo in Redemption Camp's air-conditioned and opulently appointed VIP area, I was prepared to be unimpressed. President Goodluck Jonathan was scheduled to appear on the last night of the Congress—a capstone event that would be attended by roughly 2 million people—to receive a blessing from Enoch Adeboye, Osinbajo's spiritual father and the General Overseer of RCCG. To my mind, an organization that encouraged

the multitudes to pray for riches and anointed a politician who embodied Nigeria's status quo was tacitly accepting the country's dysfunctions.

"Our most important task is winning the lost for Christ," Osinbajo told me at the start of our brief meeting. He was lean, quiet and professorial—quite unlike many of the robust, glad-handing pastors I had met elsewhere in Nigeria.

When I asked him how that imperative squared with the need to work for peace in a country that is often riven by sectarian and inter-religious strife, he replied that RCCG's commitment to social responsibility was reshaping the idea of "winning the lost" as something other than conventional evangelism.

"This means reaching out to the poorest members of our communities," he said, "even if they are not Christians. The point is trying to touch those in need in real and positive ways."

Projects sponsored by Osinbajo's division of RCCG included insurance schemes to provide healthcare for poor children as well as the "Excel" reading program, which has implemented and underwritten new teaching strategies to promote literacy in dozens of public schools in the Lagos area.

In Nigeria, El Salvador, Indonesia and other parts of the developing world, this shift in the notion of what constitutes the core imperative of the gospel marks a subtle but encouraging evolution in some strands of global Pentecostal culture. Churches are moving from simply amassing converts to promoting primary social goods like healthcare and education, regardless of the religious affiliation of the beneficiaries.

Back in January, during a supposedly secret meeting with leading Pentecostal supporters and cadre of political advisors, Goodluck Jonathan is alleged to have remarked, "Osinbajo is my problem." One might reasonably have replied that a raft of corruption charges and a feckless policy toward Boko Haram were his problem.



In any case, the comment neatly summarizes the incoming administration's winning strategy. Muhammadu Buhari, a former army general and onetime military dictator, is viewed as a law-and-order hero in Nigeria's Muslim north, where Boko Haram's predations are most acutely felt. But to win the election Buhari needed a respected running mate from the Christian south who, in addition to attracting non-Muslim votes to the ticket, would also bolster a potential Buhari administration's anti-corruption bona fides.

As this week's election results proved, Buhari's choice of Yemi Osinbajo was arguably indispensable to his success.

I sincerely hope that Buhari's inclination toward iron-fisted rule has mellowed over the decades—or that it is at least susceptible to the tempering influence of his mild-mannered vice president.

On the other hand, I believe Osinbajo's evident commitment to clean governance and fair-mindedness won't get much traction in Nigeria's brash, complex and chaotic governing culture unless Buhari is willing to put some of his own political muscle behind his vice president's ideas.

The two men proved to be a successful team on the campaign trail. May their like-minded collaboration continue well beyond inauguration day. ■

“In Nigeria, El Salvador, Indonesia and other parts of the developing world, a shift in the notion of what constitutes the core imperative of the gospel marks a subtle but encouraging evolution in some strands of global Pentecostal culture. Churches are moving from simply amassing converts to promoting primary social goods like healthcare and education, regardless of the religious affiliation of the beneficiaries.”

The Role of the Spirit in #BlackLivesMatter Movement

by Hebah Farrag
June 24, 2015

This post originally appeared on *Religion Dispatches* and was republished by *On Being* with Krista Tippett.

As the nation mourned the deaths of nine murdered at Emanuel AME Church last week, the Black Lives Matter movement held its first national retreat. From around the country, activists came together in Detroit to discuss national strategy and share tools and best practices to affect change. But they were also there to help each other heal.

While the involvement of church groups and traditional religious leaders in various aspects of Black Lives Matter has been noted by news outlets, there is another spirit that animates the Black Lives Matter movement, one that has received little attention but is essential to a new generation of civil rights activists.

When you think of the #BlackLivesMatter movement in the United States, you may think of Ferguson. You may think of Baltimore. You may think of the now-iconic image of Howard University students, hands up in the air, or statements like “I Can’t Breathe.” It may be the list of hashtagged names that grows larger every 28 hours.

But something else has stood out to me. Images of a white-clad black woman burning sage across a militarized police line. Altars using sacred images and symbols from multiple faiths placed to hold space for those murdered. Events ending with prayers for the oppressed. Protests called “ceremonies” in front of Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti’s house, with attendees asked to wear all white.

Last weekend, activists posted videos from the retreat hashtagged with #blackjoy as a reprieve from the rage and sadness.

Black Lives Matter chapters and affiliated groups are expressing a type of spiritual practice that makes use of the language of health and wellness to impart meaning, heal grief and trauma, combat burn-out and encourage organizational efficiency.

An embodiment of that spirit is Patrisse Marie Cullors-Brignac. Recently dubbed one of the nation’s top civil rights leaders by *Los Angeles Times*, named a NAACP History Maker in 2015 and one of the three founders of #BlackLivesMatter, Cullors is a person dedicated to not only transforming how her community is treated, but how her community organizes and understands itself. She is a queer polyamorous practitioner of Ifà, a religious tradition from Nigeria, and a person many people turn to not only as a political leader but as a spiritual leader.

I sat down (virtually) with Cullors to find out about what the role of spirit is in the Black Lives Matter movement.

“I come at all my work from a deep philosophical place that [asks], what does it take for humans to live in our full humanity and allow for others to live in their full dignity?” she told me. “I don’t believe spirit is this thing that lives outside of us dictating our lives, but rather our ability to be deeply connected to something that is bigger than us. I think that is what makes our work powerful.”

Cullors grew up as a Jehovah’s Witness, but left the tradition at an early age. She watched her mother leave the fellowship several times. “At any given moment, the elders, which were all men, could decide if you were going to be disassociated from the fellowship in the Kingdom Hall,” she recalled. Such an environment left her with a deep sense of shame.

“By 12, 13, I knew that this was not the place for me, but I felt very connected to spirit. So the question became, what is the place for me?” she said. She turned to her great-grandmother, who is from the Choctaw and Blackfoot tribes, and talked to her about her great-grandfather, a medicine man. Her interest in indigenous spirituality led to Ifà.

For Cullors, spirituality saves souls.

“When you are working with people who have been directly impacted by state violence and heavy policing in our communities, it is really important that there is a connection to the spirit

world,” she said. “For me, seeking spirituality had a lot to do with trying to seek understanding about my conditions—how these conditions shape me in my everyday life and how do I understand them as part of a larger fight, a fight for my life. People’s resilience, I think, is tied to their will to live, our will to survive, which is deeply spiritual.”

“The fight to save your life is a spiritual fight,” she said.

This perspective is evident in the structure of Dignity and Power Now (DPN), the grassroots organizations Cullors founded, along with many other BLM-affiliated organizations. DPN, for example, has a paid Director of Health and Wellness, a position often seen within a church but not often within a non-profit organization. Having such a position, Cullors said, is “a political choice to try to build a new way of fighting.”

“It’s not just about changing policies. It’s not just about changing lives. It’s about changing our culture and changing how we fight,” Cullors said. “We can change policies all day but if the fight to get there was full of trauma, was replicating oppressive dynamics, abusive dynamics, then what is the point?”

Organizations such as DPN and Generative Somatics have held events focused specifically on healing and spiritual well-being, from opportunities to access healing services, to intensive workshops. Cullors herself ends events with a “prayer” she recites from Assata Shakur’s Letter to the Movement: “It is our duty to fight for freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains.”

Many tell her that they are grateful for the spiritual bent of her events. “It’s tricky though,” she added. “You don’t want people to think you are going to be everyone’s end-all-be-all. What we are doing is providing a new vision of freedom for all, an idea of what life could be. Our little organization can’t do everything, but we can create a new model.”

And according to Cullors, the “healing justice networks” are growing. Groups are being

founded, such as Harriet’s Apothecary in New York, Social Transformation Project and Black Organizing for Leadership & Dignity (BOLD), which uses somatics—a practice often used in alternative medicine and psychotherapy—as tools to “transform” and empower leaders.

One reason for this growth may have to do with a key shift in ideology. DPN actively works to dismantle the martyr mentality, an ethic that causes many activists, humanitarian workers, community organizers and volunteers to burn out by devoting themselves almost entirely to the cause. DPN uses a language focused on self-care to advance the opposite notion—that you must take care of yourself first.

“My being alive is actually a part of the work,” Cullors explained. Even rudimentary things like eating healthy and exercising “are essentially taken from us, black folks in particular. To reclaim our bodies and our health, is a form of resistance, a form of resilience.”

While Cullors’ political prowess, devotion to community activism and critical understanding of community leadership and hashtag-activism has been featured in *Essence*, *Ebony*, the *LA Times*, and other publications, her dedication to radical healing, spiritual practice and self-care has not been covered. But it should be.

The influence and involvement of black religious leaders in civil rights movements in the U.S. has been well noted. The Black church, along with the Nation of Islam and notable Black Muslims, have been fundamental to political advancements in the African American community. Yet, the discussion of faith-based involvement in the black civil rights movements remains (mostly) hetero-normative and almost exclusively male.

As the black community grapples with the terrorism against it, the work of Patrisse Cullors and the Black Lives Matter movement expands the definition of “faith-based,” and offers alternate notions of faith, self-care and wellness as resistance to disrupt a martyr mentality and heal those within traumatized communities. ■

Is the Pope's Concern for Immigration Just a "Numbers Game"?

by Megan Sweas
September 24, 2015

**This post originally appeared on
Religion Dispatches.**

Pope Francis may differ greatly in tone from Pope Benedict, but on many social issues Francis can expect the same pushback his predecessor received in the United States.

When Pope Benedict brought up immigration on his 2008 trip to the United States, for example, conservative voices argued that his support of immigrants was self-serving. Then-Representative Tom Tancredo, a Republican from Colorado, accused the pope of "faith-based marketing," according to the *New York Times*, "Mr. Tancredo said Benedict's comments welcoming immigrants 'may have less to do with spreading the Gospel than they do about recruiting new members of the Church.'"

NPR's recent story on immigrant Catholics shared a similar perspective, minus the venom. The U.S. Catholic Church, the story notes, "depends on immigrant members to replenish its ranks. ... Not surprisingly, immigrants will get a lot of attention from Pope Francis on his upcoming U.S. visit."

It's certainly notable that Francis is the first pope from Latin America and that he is, as he put it (both when he landed and in his speech to Congress), "the son of immigrants."

Yet framing the Catholic Church's concern for migrants either as a personal interest of Pope Francis or as part of a numbers game discounts the moral and religious reasons behind the Catholic Church's actions. Also implicit in the latter explanation is the misperception, common to many American observers, that the United States is at the center of the church's concerns. In reality, the Catholic Church's interest in immigration ranges far beyond the Latino and Asian immigrants bolstering the ranks of the U.S. church.

"For us Christians [working for refugees] is an expression of the love of the Father in Christ Jesus," Pope Francis said of working with refugees when he visited Centro Astalli, the Jesuit Refugee Service's Center in Rome two years ago.

Before mentioning migrants from Latin America traveling north to the United States in his speech to the U.S. Congress, Pope Francis spoke of Europe's immigration crisis. "Our world is facing a refugee crisis of a magnitude not seen since the Second World War," he said. He will likely spend more time on this topic at the United Nations.

People from Syria—but also Mali, Gambia, Nigeria, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere—are streaming into Europe by sea or by foot. Most of them are not Catholic, but Muslim. As I wrote earlier this year, the Catholic Church has been at the forefront of welcoming migrants in Italy; more recently, Pope Francis has called on parishes to take in migrant families.

At Centro Astalli, Muslim men go to a back dining room in a loud, crowded soup kitchen and prostrate themselves on prayer rugs in the afternoon. Pentecostal trafficking victims I spoke to at a Catholic shelter told me they felt no pressure to convert even as they attended Mass with the Catholic sisters who were helping them.

At a branch of Centro Astalli in Catania, Sicily, a fully habited sister sat next to a veiled Muslim woman teaching recent migrants Italian. A Muslim woman staying in a decommissioned church in Palermo, Sicily said that a nearby church had offered its courtyard to the Muslim community to celebrate holidays.

The church's position on welcoming immigrants of all faiths and nationalities comes from Matthew 25:35-40, in which Jesus says, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in.... Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

At first, when the ordinary Italians I spoke to referred to immigrants as "strangers," I thought it was simply a matter of translation. But I came to understand it as an echo of Matthew 25:35-40, in which Jesus says that his face should be seen in every stranger.

Pope Francis, too, spoke of “the stranger in our midst” in his address to Congress after noting that he and “so many of you” descend from immigrants. “We must not be taken aback by their numbers, but rather view them as persons, seeing their faces and listening to their stories, trying to respond as best we can to their situation,” he said.

He challenged the U.S. Catholic bishops on this issue as well. The national bishops’ conference has been vocal supporters of immigration reform, but the diversity of migrants also challenges the church on a local level. Veteran *New York Times* religion reporter Laurie Goodstein covered these tensions without framing the church’s interest in immigration reform as a play for more members.

“Do not be afraid to welcome them,” Francis told the bishops. “Offer them the warmth of the love of Christ and you will unlock the mystery of their heart. I am certain that, as so often in the past, these people will enrich America and its Church.”

Critics of the church’s stance on immigration—and indeed, even some bishops—may hear “enrich” as filling the offering plate. But Pope Francis the pastor is interested in souls—including the souls of those in the place to provide hospitality.

“The poor are also privileged teachers of our knowledge of God; their fragility and simplicity will unmask our egoisms, our false securities, our pretenses of self-sufficiency, and guide us to the experience of the closeness and tenderness of God,” he said at Centro Astalli.

Welcoming the migrant is not just a political act; it’s a spiritual one. ■

“Framing the Catholic Church’s concern for migrants either as a personal interest of Pope Francis or as part of a numbers game discounts the moral and religious reasons behind the Catholic Church’s actions. In reality, the Catholic Church’s interest in immigration ranges far beyond the Latino and Asian immigrants bolstering the ranks of the U.S. church.”

Celebrating Christmas in an Age of Religious Extremism

Donald E. Miller
December 18, 2015

This article was originally published on *The Conversation*.

From the recent attack on Planned Parenthood to the shooting in San Bernardino, extremists of all stripes are revealing the ugly side of religion. The confluence of these events and election season demagoguery is generating fear and outrage.

In the midst of these national struggles, many families are preparing for a more personal religious fight: going to church on Christmas. Americans increasingly don't identify with a religion, with significant generational differences.

The Pew Research Center reported this year that 35% of millennials—those born between 1981 and 1996—are religious “nones.” Many young people may darken a church door only to placate their parents on Christmas and Easter.

These disparate trends are related to the same phenomenon: cultural change.

The Old and the New

Religious extremists want to roll back the clock on modernity to recreate a time when moral choices were simple and Old World values predominated. In contrast, old institutional forms are not resonating with millennials' postmodern mentality.

Fundamentalists' reaction to modernity is predictable. They are threatened by individualism, the upending of traditional values and gradual decimation of institutions that have historically maintained moral order. What is novel in the fundamentalists' response is that they use modern technology to promote their regressive morality.

For the millennial generation, the same technology expands rather than contracts their horizons. As I argue in my book *Finding Faith*, tradition means little to them. They pick and choose among various options, including the array of religions and forms of spirituality.

The common denominator of fundamentalism and millennial individualism is “over-choice.” For the former, choice is a threat. For the latter, it is an opportunity for self-expression.

A Threat From Two Sides

For many Americans, both cultural trends bring fear.

Homegrown terrorism seems like a greater threat when anyone, in any religious tradition, can be radicalized via the internet. And many grandparents fret over how younger generations will find meaning, morality and even eternal salvation without religion.

As a grandparent myself, I understand this fear, but as a scholar of religion, I'm quite positive about our future. To borrow a phrase from business and economics, mainstream religion is in a period of “creative destruction.” It may be falling apart, but contemporary culture also offers the opportunity for religion to renew itself.

One needs only to look around at the gray heads in most churches and synagogues to realize that in a generation, these institutions will be nearly empty. Yes, megachurches with hip pastors and contemporary music will continue to draw an audience, but such tribal gatherings and collective rituals can feel shallow and empty. Megachurches, too, are seeing young adults' interest and regular attendance wane.

Fundamentally, the old Christian cosmology—God sending a son to redeem the world; a God who is all-powerful and yet seemingly impotent in the face of mass violence—simply doesn't work for many educated young adults. The idea of being “spiritual but not religious” oversimplifies people's understanding of spirituality, but it also signals the possibility that the human spirit quests for something deeper than the latest technological gadget.

I believe religious institutions are mediators of four fundamental human needs: the need for community, rituals of renewal and hope, self-transcending experiences and deep meaning and purpose in our lives.

When religious institutions no longer mediate these experiences, they collapse and new forms emerge. Initially, these new forms may not look or feel like the old-time religion. They may be filled with combinations of beliefs and practices that alienate the older people who are the custodians of institutional memory. But our current period of creative destruction may be the seedbed from which new forms of religious life will germinate.

For instance, mindfulness, drawn from Eastern religious sources, resonates with many Americans. Increasing numbers of Christians participate in contemplative practices, seeking an experience of God rather than an abstract set of beliefs.

Unfortunately, fundamentalism also succeeds in meeting needs for community, renewal, self-transcendence and meaning. Tech-savvy antimodern fundamentalism—a fascinating and terrifying paradox—will not die anytime soon. Less menacingly, both megachurches and mindfulness can offer therapeutic gatherings of like-minded people that is reassuring in this time of fear and cultural flux.

New Forms Emerging

At the same time, both religious “nones” and members of existing religious institutions are experimenting with new forms of spiritual practice and intentional communities. They’re feeding the homeless, gathering in laundromats to offer free laundry service to the working poor and pushing the boundaries that traditionally define religious denominations. Through movements like #blacklivesmatter, they’re creating rituals that critique injustices and heal society and themselves.

This willingness to experiment with religious beliefs and forms previously birthed the Catholic Worker movement, contemporary monastic orders modeled after those in early modern Europe and renewal movements in all faith traditions. Religious institutions can seem unchanging during the span of a human life, but over centuries or millennia, they are evolving.

It will take time for our collective religious impulses to settle into new forms. In the meantime, there may be some fretful grandparents who fear for the salvation of their progeny.

For my part, I will be taking my grandchildren to church this Christmas. I want them to be exposed to a minor dose of mystery and awe, as well as a good narrative about hope embodied in human form. ■

Muslims Seek a Delicate Balance in a Secular Europe

by Nick Street
January 4, 2016

This story was originally published by the *Los Angeles Times* as part of a reporting project supported by the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting.

A light rain was falling as young men and women—some in hip European street clothes, others in hijabs or ankle-length robes—made their way under the high, saw-toothed roof of a former train depot for the annual Muslim Fair of Brussels. This year's theme was "Islam and Reforms."

"Where are the women?" asked Julie Pascoet as she took stock of the crowd in the fair's VIP area. Pascoet, 32, her face and shining brown eyes framed in a light-colored hijab, is a policy analyst with a progressive anti-discrimination group that includes several prominent Muslim activists.

"I'm trying to promote the inclusion of Muslims in the majority society, but I have also been saying that it's not acceptable, for example, to have so few Muslim women speaking in front of mixed Muslim crowds—both men and women," Pascoet said.

Finding that delicate balance of interests—between a majority culture that has become increasingly secular and liberal, and members of a religious minority who fear being forced to abandon their beliefs—is the primary mission of a rising generation of Muslim activists in Europe.

Young and progressive-minded, they envision a future Europe in which they can feel fully at home. But as they seek the peaceful integration of Islam into European life, they face an array of forces aligned against them.

Pascoet encountered one of those forces when she looked at the clique of men in the VIP area at the Muslim fair. But the true depth of the problem became apparent a week later when Molenbeek, the heavily Muslim neighborhood that hosted the fair, became the scene of an international manhunt.

Police had quickly zeroed in on the district in their hunt for suspects in the attacks on Paris, in which extremists apparently guided by Islamic State had killed 130 people. It was another bitter setback for those who would champion tolerance and diversity.

Pascoet's work with the European Network Against Racism, or ENAR, involves negotiating alliances with partners—gay and lesbian, feminist and Jewish activists, for example—who are sometimes suspicious of her motives. She must also convince conservative members of her own community that it's in their interests to form alliances with progressive groups to oppose discrimination based on sexual orientation, for example, as well as religious identity.

"The dilemma is there's no neat equation between any Islamic movement and secular, left-wing politics," said Arun Kundnani, a scholar at New York University who writes on race, Islamophobia, political violence and surveillance.

In Europe, he said, some of the leading Muslim organizations trace their ideological origins to groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which was founded in Egypt, and Jamaat-e-Islami in South Asia. Kundnani said that in their countries of origin, these are conservative organizations with repressive approaches to gender roles, gay rights and the accommodation of religious minorities. But in Europe, where Muslims are in the minority and young people are looking for advocates who speak out against the racism and poverty that many of them experience, there are signs of change.

"The politics have become different because the context is different," Kundnani said. "So the political parties many young Muslims in Europe want to ally themselves with are left-wing. Because of that dynamic, you see them taking much more liberal positions on women's rights, gay rights and freedom of expression."

So, for instance, ENAR, an organization with Muslims in prominent leadership positions, partnered with a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender group last year to produce an anti-discrimination video. ENAR, which is partly funded by the European Union, has also collaborated with Jewish advocacy groups to monitor online hate speech in the EU.

Some of the activists who are working on such projects are religiously observant Muslims like Pascoet and ENAR's director, Michael Privot. Others identify themselves as "spiritual, but not religious" or simply nonbelieving.

What unites them—in addition to a dense web of social and organizational networks—is the idea that adapting Islam to the West is a two-way street. Muslims must be willing to oppose discrimination against other groups if they want to enlist non-Muslim allies in the fight against head-scarf bans and other constraints on religious expression. Non-Muslim majorities, for their part, must be willing to amplify and respect the voices of ordinary Muslims who are speaking out on issues that affect them.

The current tumult in Europe, however, threatens to undermine the efforts of Pascoet and her colleagues to integrate Muslim interests into left-wing political movements in Belgium and other parts of the European Union.

"It's too early to see what the lasting impact will be," said Privot. "But already we are looking at a different conversation in France and Belgium." Muslim groups expected pushback from the far right, which has been galvanized by the Paris attacks, but they are also seeing less support from the left.

Rather than deepen his government's commitment to integrating Muslims into Belgian society after Molenbeek became the scene of yet another terrorist manhunt, Charles Michel, Belgium's center-left prime minister, has instead called for a "European CIA."

In a report to Congress this spring, the Federation of American Scientists estimated that about 4,000 citizens from Western Europe have been recruited through Islamic State networks to join fighting in Syria, Iraq and other conflict zones.

Initiatives such as ENAR are intended as an antidote to such radicalization. But Privot said he worries that powerful interests could thwart efforts to integrate Muslim immigrants into secular societies.

"Conservative movements in the gulf region are able to devote millions of euros to training young people in Medina"—seat of Saudi Arabia's ultra-orthodox Salafi movement—"and sending them back to Europe," Privot said. "Salafism can be fertile ground for extremism."

On the other hand, Privot and others complain that Western media depictions of Muslims focus relentlessly on extremism and violence—a trend documented by Britain's News Tenor Institute, which has examined news articles in Western media since Sept. 11, 2001, and found that most depicted Islam as a source of violence.

"The news from the Middle East is mainly focused on religious fanaticism," said Malikka Bouaissa, 34, founder of the online magazine *al.arte*. The magazine seeks to counter that impression with articles that spotlight artists, photojournalists and travel writers working primarily in the Middle East and North Africa, but also ranging as widely as Thailand, China and Turkmenistan.

Bouaissa was sitting in an Antwerp cafe tucked between an elegant museum housing the world's oldest printing presses and a leafy park where two teenage boys were holding their own against a pair of larger young men in a pickup basketball game.

"Everything in the media is negative," she said. "So youngsters here feel they have to protect their Muslim identity, always having to prove that they're normal. All they hear growing up is that you're useless."

A few days after the Paris attacks, Pascoet—who was born in France—said she was still feeling shock and grief. She echoed Privot’s concerns about the possible loss of progressive allies and also worried that a deepening sense of isolation among Muslims would only make matters worse.

“There’s such an emotional and toxic debate right now,” she said. “France and Belgium want to tighten security measures, but if Muslim communities feel even more stigmatized, that’s counterproductive. The proper balance is going to be really difficult to find.” ■



Why Terrorists Can't Win in World's Largest Muslim City

by Nick Street
January 21, 2016

A few minutes after newswires began to buzz with reports of a terrorist attack in Indonesia, I received a text from a friend at the *Los Angeles Times*. “My Starbucks in Jakarta got bombed!” he wrote.

The two of us, along with another USC Annenberg alum, traveled to Indonesia last March with a group of graduate students in Annenberg’s journalism program. We divided our 10 days between Yogyakarta, a cultural center in south-central Java, and Jakarta—where we stayed in a hotel about a block from the Starbucks that was targeted in last week’s terrorist attack. The title of our group’s reporting project for *GlobalPost*: Indonesia and Islam in the Age of ISIS.

After the trip I wrote about LGBT rights in Indonesia and Muslim “nones,” but the bigger story is how Islam, like other global religions, is evolving in a time of intense cultural flux. With that in mind, I’ve been reporting on “the other Muslim fringe”—artists, organizers, LGBT people and women who are adapting their practice of the faith to include those who have been marginalized and reaching out to non-Muslims committed to promoting tolerance in pluralistic societies.

In addition to stories from Indonesia, I’ve written on the opening of the Women’s Mosque of America and, most recently, the forward-looking work of Muslim Millennials in Europe.

The young Muslims in these stories may not grab headlines like ISIS, but they are much more authentic representatives of the leading edge of mainstream Islam.

One of the most important things to understand about Indonesia in the wake of the recent extremist violence is that the country’s political culture is religiously pluralistic rather than theocratic or secular. Although belief in God is enshrined in the country’s constitution, there are six officially recognized religions, and the country has nurtured numerous institutions that serve to balance competing religious interests. The most prominent of these groups are Muhammadiyah and Nahdatul Ulama (commonly known as NU),

two of the largest Muslim NGOs in the world.

This makes the religio-political culture of the world’s largest Muslim-majority country fundamentally different from Saudi Arabia’s conservative brand of Sunni Islam—a distinction that becomes quite apparent when you look at the history of minority rights in Indonesia. Dede Oetomo, founder of the country’s oldest gay rights advocacy group, said that thwarting legislative initiatives to criminalize gay sex at the national level—the last such measure, proposed in 2003, failed decisively—is an aspect of the NGOs’ broader, ongoing opposition to conservatives who want to “Arabize Indonesian Islam.”

“Like with gay people,” Oetomo said, “they may not issue a statement that they support Shiites in Indonesia (a religious minority in the Sunni-majority country), but they do.”

That support is often most apparent at the local level, where Indonesia’s relatively weak central government and corrupt judicial system provide opportunities for reactionaries, often enriched by Saudi money, to harass groups that are offensive to orthodox Sunni sensibilities. This harassment includes forcing the closure of mosques that belong to the Shia and Ahmadiyya sects, denying building permits to Christian groups, allowing agitators to disrupt LGBT gatherings and forcing nonbelievers into hiding.

Some of my interview subjects in Europe spoke of waging a similar struggle against orthodox Sunni money and influence from Saudi Arabia. In Indonesia, creating a counterweight against those socially conservative and theocratic forces unites Muhammadiyah, NU and surprising array of interest groups, including LGBT rights advocates.

Jakarta is the social media capital of the world, and the terror attacks predictably spawned a hoard of memes and hashtags. Two of the most popular Facebook and Twitter items were a photo of a satay vendor who set up his cart near the scene of the carnage (“Stay Calm, Grill Satay”) and #KamiTidakTakut (“We are not afraid”).

The proliferation of these signs of opposition—#KamiTidakTakut appeared in more than 8 million Twitter timelines—is a reminder that very few Indonesians are interested in ISIS. In fact, very few of the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims are interested in ISIS. An attack on a Starbucks in Jakarta is certainly newsworthy. But it’s also important to note that in the world’s largest Muslim city—capital of the world’s third-largest democracy—the future of Islam is happening every day. ■



How Young Muslim Activists in Sweden Fight Radicalization

by Nick Street
March 11, 2016

This article originally appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*.

When Salahuddin Barakat founded the Islam Academy in 2013, he located it on the edge of Rosengard, a predominantly Muslim neighborhood that has been a flashpoint in Sweden's sharpening debate over immigration.

It wasn't his first choice, he said, "but people in central Malmo said we don't want to rent to Muslims."

Like other madrasas, as Muslim religious schools are known, the academy teaches the Koran, traditional Sunni Islamic spirituality, sharia law and Arabic.

Unlike many, it also teaches secular topics. Among them: the Swedish language, nature and sports activities, and social responsibility. The last of these includes interreligious dialogue, especially with the Jewish community.

"All our education programs have the effect of immunizing our youth against radicalization," said Barakat, a 34-year-old imam, who was sitting in his office above the academy's prayer hall dressed in a pale, ankle-length robe and skullcap.

"They would never be able to recruit anyone from our group," he said, "because we equip them with the knowledge and methodologies to counter any argument from groups like Daesh. More than this, our youth are effecting positive change by stopping other youth from joining extremist groups."

Daesh, of course, is an Arabic nickname for Islamic State, which has made inroads on European Muslim communities, carried out terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels and elsewhere, and stoked fear and an anti-Muslim backlash among many Europeans.

That polarization has raised the stakes, and the level of difficulty, for those hoping to create stable communities in places such as Rosengard, where immigrants confront the majority culture's resistance to integrating them into Swedish civic life.

In a country that feels increasingly ambivalent about its role as Europe's humanitarian superpower, a generation of progressive-minded young Muslim activists is stepping up to help integrate unprecedented numbers of immigrants into Swedish society.

Malmo, the country's southernmost major city, is the point of entry for most of the immigrants who make their way to Sweden, and many choose to stay there. About 20 percent of Malmo's 300,000 people are Muslim, making it one of the most Muslim cities in Western Europe. Rosengard, with a population of 25,000, is often the first district that the city's newest residents call home.

A volatile mixture of social marginalization and extremist religion in some parts of Rosengard sparked riots against the police in 2008 and 2011. News reports of those incidents have created the image of Rosengard as a "no-go zone" in the minds of many non-Muslim Swedes.

Although many immigrants eventually move to other neighborhoods, Gemila al Kuraishi, 31, still calls Rosengard home.

Al Kuraishi moved from Warsaw as a child with her Polish mother and Iraqi father. Today she manages a pair of settlement houses that provide shelter and social services to teenage migrant boys who are orphaned or separated from their parents. They are precisely the sort of youth who might be vulnerable to extremism—and the sort who is likely to be singled out by nationalist and anti-immigrant groups, who view the youths as a threat.

The boys in her settlements don't deserve pity, Al Kuraishi said, neither for the traumas they have endured nor for the hatred directed toward them by right-wing groups.

"Don't feel sorry for them," she said, sitting in a rustic-chic coffeehouse in a shopping mall not far from Rosengard. Young women in expensive-looking hijabs strolled by in pairs or with baby carriages, while blond, tattooed hipsters fussed with their smartphones.

“We have to respect them. Most of them have been working since they were 8 or 9. Sure, they’ve been through things we can’t imagine. But they don’t need to be saved. They need tools”—Swedish-language classes and high school educations, primarily—“to make it in a new society.”

Making it in Sweden and actually feeling Swedish are two very different propositions for the country’s young Muslims, regardless of whether they are religiously observant. It’s a dichotomy that Al Kuraishi has faced personally. Her friends jokingly call her “Gemila Ghetto” for her insistence on living in Rosengard amid the religiously observant immigrants she serves. Yet she sees herself as a modern, secular Swede.

“My dad is still pious, but I don’t define myself as religious at all,” Al Kuraishi said. “I’m too secular to be a good Muslim; I have accepted the ways of this land.”

Still, when non-Muslim Swedes are critical of Islam, she often finds herself defending the faith. Even being a secular Muslim “still sets you apart from the rest of Sweden,” she said.

Native Swedes’ wariness toward the city’s Muslims reinforces the wall of economic, religious and political isolation around Rosengard. Even before the terrorist attacks in Paris heightened tension between Sweden’s Muslim and non-Muslim populations—Muslims account for about half a million of the country’s 9 million people—a backlash against immigrants was already building.

Last year, there were dozens of arson attacks on refugee settlements throughout the country after the Sweden Democrats, a nationalist party formed in 1988, published the addresses of the settlements. Recent polls show the Sweden Democrats winning the approval of about a quarter of the electorate in Malmo, a percentage that puts them neck-and-neck with the Social Democrats, the center-left party that created Sweden’s modern welfare state.

As Sweden and neighboring Denmark tighten border controls in response to the Paris attacks, which killed 130 people in November, the appeal of radical religion for some young Muslims in places like Rosengard is likely to intensify.

“The radicalization of youth is largely based on their being frustrated and made to feel like outsiders,” said Barakat, the imam. “We have to address the social reasons for radicalization if we want to work in the long run for the society we would like to see.”

Barakat, whose family moved to Sweden from Lebanon when he was 7, said some of Rosengard’s religious communities are also doing good work—providing employment training and Swedish-language classes, for example.

For a “no-go zone,” Rosengard has a surprising amount of green space. Rolling, grassy lawns with well-maintained playgrounds surround blocky, high-rise apartment towers. Tidy kitchen gardens flourish next to the main entrance of many buildings.

After the 2008 riots, the Swedish government increased the amount of money available for infrastructure projects in Rosengard, including a new train station that has lessened the area’s sense of isolation. Service groups, many operating under the aegis of Ibn Rushd, a state-funded Muslim community development organization, are responsible for the neighborhood’s landscaping and kitchen gardens.

“Rosengard is Sweden’s future,” said Aladdin al Qut, the organization’s director for southern Sweden.

Part of the young Muslim activists’ strategy for integration is to link Sweden’s Islamic communities with some of the groups that Muslims from repressive societies must learn to tolerate in a culturally diverse democracy. Barakat, for example, is a member of Coexist Malmo, an interreligious organization that includes Jewish, Buddhist and Christian representatives, as well as gay-friendly groups such as the Metropolitan Community Church.

Expanding opportunities for minority participation in the political process figures into their strategy as well.

“Malmo City Hall is similar to Ferguson,” Barakat said, referring to the St. Louis suburb where weeks of civil unrest followed the fatal shooting of an unarmed black man by a white police officer in 2014. “Our government doesn’t look like the community.”

Indeed, in a city where first- and second-generation immigrants compose nearly half the population, Malmo’s 61-member municipal council is overwhelmingly of Swedish descent. With Malmo poised to become Sweden’s first minority-majority city in the next few years, finding a remedy for that imbalance is one of the activists’ key long-term goals—and the bellwether for the country’s future political stability.

“Our focus is on building a generation that can have a conversation with the elite and take part in the process,” Barakat said. “To do that we have to not just educate but challenge Swedish society. In a democracy I have a right to work against policies I don’t like. I am here to remind the majority of that.” ■

Reporting for this story was supported by the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting.

“We have to respect them. Most of them have been working since they were 8 or 9. Sure, they’ve been through things we can’t imagine. But they don’t need to be saved. They need tools—Swedish-language classes and high school educations, primarily—to make it in a new society.”

The Habit and the Hijab: An Exploration on Sacred Dress

by Hebah Farrag
May 19, 2016

Not all nuns look the same.

As a Muslim American with very little exposure to Catholicism, I recently have learned about the diversity of Catholic sisters. This basic lesson has proven to be a door to a more nuanced understanding of female modesty and devotional dress, and it has shown me that Muslim women and Catholic sisters may have more in common than we might think.

At CRCC, I'm currently part of a team evaluating the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Catholic Sisters Initiative, a grant-funding program driven by the desire to help Catholic sisters and nuns, also known as women religious, as they advance human development. I have learned that sisters take different vows than nuns and live and minister actively in the world, while nuns are contemplatives. Like most people, I tend to associate Catholic sisters with the habit, but not all women religious wear it.

In fact, women religious express their vows and religious devotion in their dress in a great variety of ways, colors, forms, uniforms or lack thereof. I have come to find that women religious, like many other women who express themselves through devotional dress and modesty, struggle with the public's misperception and misrepresentation of their religious choice along with the silencing of their diversity.

The modernizing reforms of the Second Vatican Council asked orders of women religious to re-evaluate their identities and work and return to the spirit of their founders. Many orders found that their founders had dressed modestly in the style of the day in order to best serve those around them. Consequently, many orders did away with habit completely in the late 1960s, while others got rid of stiff wimples in favor of simpler coverings. Still, some Catholics would prefer it if all women religious were habited, arguing that the habit sets the women apart and makes them stand-out more. Even unhabited sis-

ters discuss whether sisters need to wear some sort of uniting symbol. The habit can create a divide among women religious themselves, often marking ideological differences.

Among Muslim women, there have been similar, though less codified negotiations around religious dress historically. One oft cited example is Egyptian feminist Huda Sha'arawi, who removed her face veil in 1923 and ushered in a new wave of conversations around modesty, class and choice in the Middle East. In more recent history, Muslim women have seen their choice of devotional dress become the subject of almost constant debate and crusade, both from within and without.

Muslim women have heard it all: Take off the hijab. Put on the hijab. Your hijab is too low. Your hijab is too colorful. Your hijab is tied wrong. Where is your niqab? Never wear the niqab. Don't wear pants. It's okay to wear pants, but not too tight. You get my point.

Much like women religious, Muslim women engage with their creator in a sacred vow that is often expressed in their dress. The public judgment and debate about their decision is common across Catholicism and Islam—as it is within and between Jewish denominations, too.

What Muslim women, globally from my perspective, have learned very acutely and very personally, is that it does not work to dictate what women wear. Whether asking a woman to put on the veil or forcing her to take it off, the result is the same—an assault on her religious freedom. The lesson of the hijab is to embrace diversity.

Writing for Global Sisters Report, Sister Julia Walsh shared that prior to becoming a sister, she didn't know that some orders of sisters wore plain clothes and others wore habits. "It didn't take me long to learn about the differences and hear Catholics and sisters express a range of beliefs and feelings—often impassioned—about what expressions of faith showed whether one was faithful and loved God and church," she wrote. Through Giving Voice, a Hilton-funded project focused on younger women religious,

Walsh hopes to “have friendships with *all* types of Catholic sisters,” not only those who dressed like herself and her order.

The landscape also is ripe for partnership between Muslim women and Women Religious, a partnership that would move conversations beyond what they are wearing, to common priorities, such as advancing human development and combatting xenophobia.

The groundwork has already been laid. In Los Angeles, the Muslim and Catholic Women in Conversation group meets monthly to explore topics such as prayer, rituals and culture, while also putting on joint programming and service activities. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops recently announced it was starting a new national Catholic-Muslim dialogue group, “an initiative driven in part by growing anti-Islamic sentiment that many bishops have denounced.” In the Middle East, there is a long history of partnership among women religious and local Muslim women, who revere Catholic sisters’ devotion to the underserved and have a deep love for Mary, mother of Jesus. In his highly acclaimed Arabic novel, *Sitt Marie Rose*, for example, author Etel Adnan uses a Catholic nun as his central character to unravel themes of the Lebanese Civil War. Devotional dress opens the door to important conversations around women, faith, choice and service.

In my work with Catholic sisters I have become quite struck by the beauty and variety of devotional dress, whether the various forms of habit, the subtle colors and what they mean, or the way sisters that do not wear a habit express their religious vows through wooden crosses, colorful socks, broad smiles and loose hair. The vitality in the expression of joy and devotion in Catholic sisters’ religious garb, or lack of garb, represents so beautifully the variance of belief and freedom of choice within the vocation. Likewise, the spectrum, beauty and variety of female sacred dress in the Islamic tradition—including mipsters, niqabis, qubaysis or Muslim women who express modesty without the hijab—has always been to me a testament to the diversity within the faith both in the expression of religious belief and personal choice.

There seems to me to be a natural partnership between these two groups of women, Muslim women and Catholic sisters, a space to work together in an interfaith capacity to aid in mutual understanding, dispel misperception, serve the world’s poor and stand with those in need, united, whether with or without the habit and hijab. ■

A Time for Moral Reflection— The Silver Lining After the Orlando Shooting

by Donald E. Miller
June 21, 2016

In the horror of the Orlando massacre, there may be a silver lining. This event, as well as the killings at Emanuel Church in Charleston one year ago and other national atrocities, creates an occasion for the core values of Americans to be articulated by national leaders in prime-time speeches, vigils and other commemorations.

Rituals play an important role in renewing the values that unite a group or nation, the French sociologist Emile Durkheim said a hundred years ago. No collectivity of people, he argued, can exist for very long without ritual moments of renewal.

Weak expressions of renewal occur on national holidays, such as the Fourth of July and celebrations of presidents or national heroes, such as Martin Luther King. But when something horrible happens, such as the massacre of children or a particular group—those who are black or gay—people cry out for an articulation of the deepest values that sustain us.

Hence, in speeches, vigils and even funerals this past week, we have heard impassioned declarations against racism, homophobia and hatred of all kinds. The moral order was attacked in Orlando, and it needs repair.

But something even more important occurred. Positive values related to pluralism, tolerance and love were articulated. Pictures of gay people embracing were projected around the world and viewed as acts of compassionate love. Muslims wrote articles countering homophobia in their community. And on the eve of the Charleston shooting, we heard the pastor of Mother Emanuel Church talk about forgiveness.

Of course, there was the predictable backlash, including one prominent Evangelical who implied that it was okay for Muslims to kill gays. They don't seem to be children of God in his book. And there was a candidate for president that painted all Muslims with the brush of radical Islam. But interestingly, such remarks have become the foil for forceful statements about the core values of democracy and freedom of religion. The bigoted remarks represent mistakes

in American history of making incendiary generalizations about specific categories of people.

As someone who has studied genocide for many years, I am aware that dehumanizing a minority population is the first step in mass extermination. It is much easier to kill someone who is an "outsider." In the case of the Armenians, they were labeled "infidels." In Rwanda, Hutu extremists openly called the Tutsi minority cockroaches and snakes and said they were descendants of Ethiopians.

Hence, it was with pride and relief that I heard President Barack Obama and spokespersons at vigils around the world articulate the ideals—the core values—that unite us as members of the human family.

The massacre in Orlando has created the opportunity for a public discussion about what we value and who we are as a nation. Yes, Donald Trump says that his ratings go up every time there is an attack. But I think we should not lose sight of the way this tragedy is creating an occasion for Americans to engage in moral debate rather than one-sided political posturing.

The sociologist Robert Bellah argued that there is such a thing as an American civil religion that crosses all faith traditions and represents the ideals that unite us as a people. He was deeply worried that modern individualism was destroying these core values that civilize us and argued that we have lost the moral vocabulary that is central to our democracy.

There is some truth to his argument, especially as we witness a polarized electorate that seems unable to engage in moral debate about policy issues and has forgotten the art of compromise. But the current events, however horrible, seem to be opening the door to a discussion of human rights on a different moral plain.

The challenge confronting us is to make certain that we don't miss this moment for moral reflection on our fundamental values as a people. Can the cascade of recent horrific events create an occasion for parents and children to talk about racism, nationalism and discrimination at

the kitchen table? Can this conversation extend into study groups in synagogues, churches and mosques?

At the heart of healing any trauma—whether rape or PTSD suffered in war—is interpretation. An individual must take the event into one’s life narrative, making sense of it. For some traumatized people, healing comes from their mission to prevent violence for others in the future. Simply ignoring the trauma or rationalizing it never works. Traumatic events have to be dealt with,

and when they are, sometimes the individual emerges even stronger.

We must not lose this opportunity in our nation’s history to confront an evil act. Childlike acts of lashing out at the “other” are not healing in the long run, however satisfying they may seem in the moment. We need to take the pain of Orlando into our hearts and make some important moral choices about who we are as a people. ■



Making Evangelical America Great Again: Trump and “Wall” Christians

by Donald E. Miller
August 4, 2016

Along with many other observers, I have been struggling to understand how nearly 80 percent of white evangelical Protestant voters can support Donald Trump, someone who has a dubious church-going record and a tattered moral history, especially related to family-values issues.

Indeed, the contortions that various evangelicals have gone through to justify their allegiance to Trumpism is amazing. For instance, Focus on the Family’s founder, James Dobson, dubbed him a “baby Christian.” Being “born again” wipes the slate clean, and Trump can now be embraced as one of them.

Trying to square Trump’s view of the world with evangelical theology is too mind-boggling for me. So let’s take another tack, which was illuminated recently in an article by *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman. He makes a distinction between “Wall People” and “Web People” in understanding the election.

Wall People attempt to quiet the winds of change by isolating themselves from everything that they believe is threatening to their way of life—immigrants, globalization, climate change and so on. In contrast, Web People embrace change and strive to work in a borderless world that acknowledges the technological innovations that are driving globalization and other challenges to the status quo.

Extending Friedman’s logic, we can call evangelical Trump supporters “Wall People.” They feel threatened by dramatic cultural shifts in the world around them, and rightly so.

The evangelical worldview is being challenged by, among other things, exponential gains in scientific knowledge—especially in cosmology. The notion that humans are a special creation of God got knocked off track with the Copernican revolution. But today—when new satellite imaging technologies enable us to look out into space and see that we are merely one small planet among billions of galaxies—it is quite reasonable to ask, “Where does God reside?”

Technology also challenges the idea that evangelicals are the only ones with insight into ultimate truth. In Friedman’s spin on globalization, the world is “flatter” today thanks to our ability to easily connect and exchange information across continents. Truth has been relativized the more we interact with people of other faiths, cultures and belief systems. Are they all really going to Hell?

Like Friedman, I understand why one might want to wall oneself off from the winds of change. Globalization and technology can be threatening, both to one’s sense of community and also to one’s ability to provide for a family. These challenges are real and long-term.

They make getting behind a “wall-builder” seem sensible for many evangelicals. If you are going to remain in a silo, it is a good idea to demonize Muslims and other people who don’t align with your faith. And why not deny science, especially if it threatens your coal-mining jobs or challenges your repudiation of evolution?

Then there are the Web Christians. Of course, I am not implying that Wall evangelicals do not use the Internet. Actually, they are extremely sophisticated in propagating their gospel through the Web, as well as sharing music, sermons and various religious products through digital media.

For Friedman, Web People do not build walls to try to keep globalization, technology or climate change at bay. Christians in this group allow science to inform their religion. They do not operate out of a fear-based mentality; instead, they are constantly evolving in their understanding of spirituality. They partner with people of other faiths, building bridges across religious traditions as they work together for justice, equality and peace.



It's notable that some high-profile evangelicals, such as Jim Wallis, have resisted Trumpism, and more than a fifth of Protestant evangelicals are not voting for Trump. The number rises if you consider non-white evangelicals, and as my colleague Andrew Johnson points out, not all evangelicals are white these days. It's also important to note that Catholics, another significant voting block, are not embracing Trump in the same numbers as evangelicals.

Hillary Clinton's talk of her own faith and her pick of Tim Kaine as her vice presidential running mate could be seen as an effort to appeal to Web Christians, especially those in the Republican Party, as well as libertarian-leaning religious "nones."

In the final analysis, simplistic typologies such as Wall People and Web People rarely

capture nuanced developments, and this is particularly true when it comes to religion. Still, it's useful to see how Trump's central imperative—"Make America Great Again"—evokes feelings of nostalgia, loss and anger that deeply resonate with a voting block that reached its apex of cultural and political influence during the Reagan era and have seen their dominance slowly but steadily erode over the past three decades.

So even if Trump's lifestyle doesn't accurately reflect the faith of white evangelicals, his rhetoric does echo the fears of those who prefer walls over webs. That's probably enough to ensure wall evangelicals' loyalty to Trump in the voting booth. Whether that loyalty will turn out to have been misplaced is another question altogether. ■



VP Debate: Tim Kaine and American Religion in Flux

by Megan Sweas
October 5, 2016

Tim Kaine's faith story is an essential part of his stump speech. At the vice presidential debate, the Democratic candidate mentioned his missionary year in his response to the first question, then had the chance to expand upon his story in the next-to-last question. He spoke of his family, his Jesuit high school education and his year working at a Jesuit mission in Honduras. Kaine is in public service because of his faith, yet he explained that he chooses not to legislate his personal beliefs.

As the *New York Times* notes, the VP candidates bring religion and morality into an election season in which they are largely absent. At the debate, both Kaine and Republican Mike Pence presented simplified stories of faith and politics. Over the past few weeks, I've had the chance to delve into the details of Kaine's faith life for a story I wrote for *Religion & Politics*. Kaine's story and the response to it seems to reflect trends in American religion today. I've seen several of the major themes emerging from our research on religious creativity and innovation come out in this election.

Experience over Ideology

Both journalists and voters sometimes seem perplexed when Kaine insists that his career in public service is spiritually motivated and grounded in his Catholic faith, at the same time that he has voted in favor of abortion rights and presided over 11 executions. Pence pushed him on the abortion issue in particular during the debate. On a Reddit thread, I even found an atheist calling him a hypocrite, arguing that he should fight for what he believes if he truly believes it.

Some explain Kaine's position on life issues as separating the personal and political, as many Catholic Democrats have done to justify their allegiance to the party line on abortion. Yet, a deeper look at his story shows that this

isn't exactly right. As John Carr of Georgetown University's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life told me, "His commitment comes from faith and experience, not simply from influence and ideology."

Carr was specifically referring to Democratic Party ideology in this case, but it also applies to Catholic ideology. Kaine's position on life issues is not about pushing aside personal values but about a struggle between two seemingly competing personal values. To quote my own *R&P* piece:

And the same experience that taught Kaine to value faith and service led to his seemingly contradictory stances on how to live out his faith in the public square. In Honduras, he told C-SPAN, "I saw what it was like to live in a society where the rulers did whatever they wanted regardless of the law."

So when his opponent in the 2005 race for governor ran ads attacking Kaine's opposition to the death penalty, Kaine promised to uphold the law. The death penalty, he told David Gregory this year, is "emblematic of the kind of thing you've gotta struggle with in life. I would describe it as a clash between two important principles"—the sanctity of life and the rule of law.

Colleagues have told *The New York Times* that Kaine grappled over every death-penalty appeal for clemency as governor and would appear pained all day. He still struggles with those decisions. He told the *National Catholic Reporter* in August, "I hope on Judgment Day that there's both understanding and mercy."

A recurring theme in CRCC's research is the importance of individual experience in forming a person's understanding and beliefs about the world and spirituality. This also fits with what Kaine likely learned in Honduras about Liberation Theology, which looks at scripture and church teachings from the perspective of the lived experience of the poor.

Interestingly, Pence's religious story also speaks to the primacy of spiritual experience. As I wrote for *R&P*, both veep candidates found Catholicism lacking in spirit:

While Pence became evangelical to find a personal relationship with Christ, Kaine found God in the kind of jovial communal Catholic worship he experienced in Honduras. "Mass was 2.5 hours long, and it was so vibrant and chaotic and fun," he told C-SPAN.

Interestingly, Pence did not mention his Catholic background during the debate. His move away from Catholicism is not uncommon—13 percent of adults raised Catholic consider themselves to be evangelicals—and it concerns many Catholics. The "New Evangelization" movement in the Catholic Church hopes to inject the sense of spirit that Pence and Kaine both desired. Had Pence grown up Catholic today, he might have gotten involved in any number of "evangelical Catholic" youth programs where Catholics too are able to develop a "personal relationship" with Jesus Christ while singing catchy pop tunes made popular at World Youth Day celebrations.

These enthusiastic young Catholics, however, remain a minority. The Catholic Church is losing young people faster than any other denomination in the U.S. and most of them go to no religion. As a Vatican II Catholic, Kaine can be seen as representing a transitional generation. He still expresses consternation about putting the rule of law above the sanctity of life, and he

says that in the end, he "accepts" church teachings even if he disagrees with them. The next generation does not care about church teachings as much—one's personal experience supplants the teachings of the institution without (or perhaps with less) guilt.

"It's all Good" Nones

Many thought that Clinton's pick of Kaine was unwise, disillusioning those young and largely non-religious voters who rallied behind Bernie Sanders. Perhaps, though, Clinton has been listening to CRCC's Richard Flory.

First, there's the somewhat obvious argument that young "nones" aren't as likely as the Democratic religious base or even religious moderates to show up at the polls on November 8, as Religion News Service reports. As I wrote at *R&P*, Kaine's unique story puts him in a strong position to rally Black Church voters and Latino Evangelicals, as well as Catholics.

But when I was looking for responses from religiously unaffiliated Americans, I was surprised to find a defense of Kaine's religious life.

On a Reddit atheism thread, one user described a Kaine speech as "religious pandering at its most sickening," asking if others were "nauseated" by it too.

Others came to Kaine's defense. "This is the sort of religious person I can respect," another user responded. "If he's proud of his Catholicism, then good on him."

That line almost perfectly echoes what Flory calls his "it's all good" theory. In CRCC's research, we've seen movements away from the more militant atheism of Richard Dawkins, et al., toward more positive humanist movements. Most people without religious affiliation don't care what their neighbors believe or don't believe, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone. As the Reddit commenter said: "I don't believe in god, but I'm fine with people who do as long as they don't expect me to live by their religion's code."

When the faith question came up during the debate, I saw this same range in responses. Here are just a few examples:

Christopher Berghoff @ChrisBerghoff
I cannot wait for the day that FAITH stops being a part of ANY political discussion
#VPdebate
7:26 PM—4 Oct 2016

Secular Coalition @seculardotorg
@timkaine nails it: “I don’t believe that the doctrines of any one religion should be mandated for everyone.”
#VPDebate #secularvalues
7:25 PM - 4 Oct 2016

Shannon Coulter @shannoncoulter
Solid answer from @timkaine on struggle to reconcile religion & public life. Very authentic.
#VPDebate
7:26 PM - 4 Oct 2016

One reason people find Donald Trump appealing despite his many gaffs is that he seems “authentic,” a value in this age where individual experience rules. It’s something that Clinton has struggled with over the years, in her desire to protect her privacy. Kaine had his gaffs at the debate and has been criticized for interrupting his opponent. This election season, policy points may matter less than whether Kaine can convince voters that he and his running mate are the most authentic candidates, religion and all. ■

“Most people without religious affiliation don’t care what their neighbors believe or don’t believe, as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone. As the Reddit commenter said: ‘I don’t believe in god, but I’m fine with people who do as long as they don’t expect me to live by their religion’s code.’”



Looking
Forward

The Top Five Religion Trends to Watch in 2016

by CRCC Staff
December 18, 2015

From the rise of evangelical hipsters to the rise of religious “nones,” religion is in a period of flux as we end one year and look forward to the next. Here at the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture, we study how religions change and make change in the world. Below are five trends that we are watching, paired with headlines you might see in *The Onion* in 2016. In other words, don’t take our “predictions” too seriously. But there’s often great truth in satire.

1. Trump Alienates “Papists”

During Pope’s Trip to Mexico

Donald Trump has already maligned Latinos and Muslims in his presidential campaign, so it only seems natural that Catholics will be his next target. As Pope Francis follows the migrant route to the U.S.-Mexico border in February, an attack on Catholics will keep Trump in the headlines just as the first few primary results roll in.

Seriously, though, Pope Francis’ message of hope and mercy may pose problems for certain U.S. politicians in 2016. The *New York Times* recently analyzed 95,000 of Trump’s words and found his rhetoric to be overwhelmingly fearful and violent. Pope Francis’ words from his U.S. trip stand in sharp contrast to Trump’s. Even as many are turning away from religious institutions, the leader of the world’s largest religious institution is articulating a message that resonates broadly. On his trip to Mexico, he will capture many hearts north of the border, too, possibly igniting a new push for compassionate immigration reform.

Nothing is too outrageous for Trump, but alienating the Catholic swing vote wouldn’t serve him well if he makes it past the primaries. By the time we reach the general election, we predict that Americans will want a more hopeful leader. We’ll be betting on whatever candidate best taps into Francis’ spirit of hope—the word, not coincidentally, that took Barack Obama to the White House eight years ago.

2. New Hashtag Goes Viral:

#SpiritualLivesMatter

From university campuses and town hall forums, to churches, synagogues and mosques, to our political arenas and talk shows, people are talking about race, thanks in a major part to Black Lives Matter, the hashtag turned social movement.

No, we don’t actually think #SpiritualLivesMatter will or even should go viral, but activists have found that they have to care for their spiritual lives to sustain themselves. Yes, many of these socialist-leaning, Marxist-studying social justice activists believe profoundly in the spirit and practice it, not only in their homes, but in their protests.

BLM chapters and affiliates have become a spiritual home to a new generation of activists. They use altars at their protests and burn sage when standing before police lines. They practice traditional African faith rituals, such as Ifa and Santería, and turn to healing techniques such as reiki and somatics as a form of self-care.

BLM also embraces all parts of the black community, including the Queer and Transgender communities. This radical inclusion and the promotion of acceptance have led to tensions between BLM activists and traditional religious leaders.

In 2016, the BLM movement may have an impact well beyond our police departments. BLM may push churches to grapple with their acceptance of LGBTQ people. Look for BLM to also influence and create new communities of spiritual practice within social justice circles and beyond.

While BLM is definitely not church, it is spirit-infused, and that spirit has given it power.



3. **32 Percent of Evangelical Pastors Have At Least One Tattoo Visible While Preaching**

Well, maybe not exactly 32 percent, but an unmistakable hipster aesthetic will become more prominent behind the pulpit of many evangelical churches. Though Millennials are less likely than any generation of Americans before them to maintain a religious affiliation, evangelical churches are thriving among the waves of Millennials who have poured into cities like Los Angeles over the last decade.

Currently, three of the largest churches in the city of Los Angeles, Hillsong, Oasis and RealityLA, are comprised almost exclusively of 20-somethings. Megachurches are no a longer suburban phenomenon; they now rent out central city theaters and school auditoriums. Justin Bieber even made the Staples Center into a megachurch this fall, according to the LA Times' review of his concert.

As cities continue to transform and attract recent college graduates, singles and young families—the type of people who would have never considered city-life twenty years ago—evangelical churches will continue to appear in unlikely urban spaces. As they continue to grow, they also will draw more people into cities' core spaces and speed up gentrification processes that are already running hot.

We'll be watching how these dynamics unfold—including both the role urban churches play in their communities and how a hip, urban environment affects evangelical churches. The pros and cons to this sort of urban development depend on a person's perspective, but one thing is for sure: The tattoo parlors will be happy.

4. **Evangelical Pastor Declares, "We're all Queer!"**

LGBT issues have long been a part of mainline Protestant denominations; by now, LGBT people are largely accepted as just other members of the church. Evangelicals have taken a much more oppositional stance to

LGBT acceptance. The Supreme Court decision declaring same-sex marriage bans are unconstitutional has presented a problem for many evangelical groups, but for others, it just underscores how they were already thinking about their role in the larger culture.

In 2016, we'll be watching how evangelical churches and other organizations, such as colleges, universities and seminaries, adjust. We predict that an increasing number will show greater acceptance of LGBT individuals, in essence "de-queering" their identities just as mainline Christians have done. And not all of the LGBT-accepting evangelicals will be the ones with tattoos (see above). In turn, this will produce a non-negotiable line for other evangelical organizations, where we will see a hardening of their position on LGBT issues, creating a rift within the evangelical world over LGBT issues.

Also watch for pushback from parts of the young LGBT community that do not want acceptance from any church organizations. These groups are already partnering with broader justice movements, including Black Lives Matter (see above), to find healing through alternative spiritual practices.

5. **Silicon Beach Venture Capitalists Venture into Religion**

The tech industry isn't the only one innovating these days. Several groups essentially serve as the R&D divisions for long-standing religious institutions in Southern California. Holy Ground in Long Beach and Thad's in Santa Monica are "off-the-books" laboratories of the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles where the beliefs and rituals that have traditionally defined mainline Protestantism are pulled apart and reassembled in remarkable ways. Similar experimental enclaves exist within Jewish and Muslim communities.

Maybe the most innovative groups in the Los Angeles area are informal, service-oriented gatherings like Laundry Love, Share-

A-Meal and Monday Night Mission. These initiatives attract young participants from an array of religious traditions, as well as large contingents of religious “nones,” to provide meals or free laundry to the homeless and working poor.

These loosely organized groups aren’t likely to coalesce into new religious institutions on their own—that’s definitely not the intention motivating the people who started them. But by creating religiously diverse networks of volunteers around the common impulse to help those in need, they could provide the

DNA for new communities that will be unlike the churches, mosques and temples we currently know.

Whether or not they attract the attention of venture capitalists—Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg did launch his own version of innovative philanthropy this year—we’ll be watching Southern California’s spiritual R&D laboratories closely to see which ones succeed or fail. The religious equivalent of Facebook or the iPhone could emerge from the one of them at any moment. ■



American Christianity Is Changing Fast: Five Stories to Watch in 2016

by Richard Flory
January 5, 2016

This post originally appeared on *Religion Dispatches*.

While LGBT evangelicals cheered on the SCOTUS decision on gay marriage, evangelical institutions lobbied for the passage of “religious freedom” laws that would allow them to discriminate.

When President Obama mouthed platitudes during the funeral of the slain Rev. Clementa Pinckney at Emanuel AME, activist Bree Newsome took it upon herself to scale a flagpole and take down an instrument of hate and bigotry.

Pope Francis is a rock star, but Americans are still leaving church in droves.

This and other powerful juxtapositions are just part of the reason many of us now refer to American “Christianities,” rather than the singular “Christianity.” The five key stories below evoke questions that religion-watchers will be asking for years to come.

1. The Emptying of Church Pews

The trend that has received a significant amount of attention, from religious observers as well as religious leaders, is the so-called “Rise of the Religious Nones.” The number of dropouts/defectors from church involvement has risen significantly over the last several years, such that about 23 percent of the American population now claims no religious affiliation. They leave for many reasons, ranging from a general disillusionment with large-scale institutions in general to the politicization of religion and religious scandals—whether financial, sexual or both.

Beyond the general distrust of large-scale institutions and the disconnect between politics, culture and what people are looking for in church, this shift represents a failure on the part of most churches to provide a message and organizational structure that will both attract and retain church members. This will

likely continue, but will churches adapt by figuring out what people want in church, or will they continue to stagnate and decline? On the other hand, what alternative forms, if any, of “church” might people be forming to replace the religious communities that they have left?

2. Increased LGBT Acceptance Within Evangelicalism

Although issues related to LGBT identities have long been a part of Mainline Protestant denominations such that LGBT individuals are largely accepted as just another member of the church, evangelicals have taken a much more adversarial stance to LGBT acceptance. However, increasing numbers of evangelical churches are accepting LGBT individuals as members.

This development is not without its opponents, however. Many evangelical organizations—most significantly colleges, universities and seminaries—are mobilizing to retain their “religious right” to discriminate against LGBT individuals. More than 30 evangelical higher education institutions have petitioned the U.S. Department of Education to receive a religious exemption from Title IX requirements related to sexual orientation and transgender identity.

What bears watching is not only what will happen among those evangelical organizations that are trying to hold back the march of history, but what will happen internally to evangelicalism itself. Increasing numbers of evangelical believers are either supportive of LGBT rights or at least not staunchly against it, while institutions that are part the “evangelical industrial complex” (churches, schools, publishing houses, etc.), have the resources and desire to maintain their anti-LGBT stance.

And this is not limited to white evangelicalism. The tension between the Black Lives Matter movement and some Black Church leaders is at least in part because of the legitimacy

that BLM accords LGBT activists, who in turn are challenging traditional Church leaders as legitimate representatives of the African American community.

Will new cleavages appear within evangelicalism (or deepen within the Black Church), pitting these factions against each other? Or, will those groups that are not invested in either the evangelical industrial complex, or remaining culture war issues like LGBT rights, move to create alternative institutions that better serve their needs?

3. The Francis Effect

If Pope Francis' fall 2015 tour is any indicator, he is having an enormous influence on the religious imagination of Catholics, other Christians, and even those of other (and no) faith. His (seemingly) more open and welcoming take on Catholicism, his embrace of anybody who approaches him, and his frankly fearless presentation of a much more friendly Catholicism, has many Catholics hoping for a "Francis effect" that will draw Catholic church dropouts back, or even attract new converts.

I have my doubts that a newly resurgent Catholic Church will result from the Pope's influence. There is just too much institutional inertia in how the Church is organized and a charismatic Pope, however inspiring his message may be, is unlikely to change that.

Will there be a larger "Francis effect" that results in bringing religion into the public conversation about social justice? Or will this just be a lot of media hoopla with no real, practical effects developing from his influences?

4. The Localization of Church

Smaller, local-oriented churches seem to be popping up all over the place, each with a general emphasis on being an active part of their local communities. Although these tend to mostly be evangelical churches, there are some more experimental Mainline Protestant congregations in the mix. They appeal to an increasing desire among many Christians to be in smaller, more intimate communities and to be an active member in the neighborhoods where they are located. These churches tend to think of themselves as a family environment that is as much focused on its surrounding neighborhoods as it is on its own members.

Even megachurches are getting in on the act by establishing franchised outposts in different local communities that are somewhat remote from the mother church. The difference between the megachurch franchise locations and the more independent congregations generally tends to be in terms of resourcing (the mega franchises have more) and content (mega franchise churches tend to deliver the same product as the home church). However, the presence of smaller, remotely located mega franchises indicates that the "church in the local community" is now an important development within Christianity. This can really be thought of as a type of parish model, although the independence of most of these churches (as compared to the Catholic model) sets them apart.

How long will this trend continue, and in what ways will it develop over the coming years? One of the drivers of this effort is related to the desires of younger Christians to live and work in urban areas. But with the influx of mostly younger and white members, what happens to the city, and the Christian voice that remains?



5. Urban Ministry Goes Mainstream

There is a long history of urban churches and ministries in the U.S.—whether Mainline, Catholic or evangelical—whose avowed purpose is to minister to the urban poor and dispossessed. Of course, there is also a history of churches vacating urban spaces when their neighborhoods became less like their membership. But in many ways the presence of urban ministries has served as a sort of corrective (or at least collective guilt reliever) for suburban churches.

Over the last 15 years or so, there has been a resurgence of churches and other ministries being established in tough urban neighborhoods, while some never left. The Los Angeles Dream Center is a good example of the former, while the Union Rescue Mission is an example of the latter.

This resurgence correlates with the current urban revitalization efforts in many cities. As urban areas are redeveloped, mostly younger professionals have moved into the newly built condos and lofts to take up residence in what were formerly “sketchy” areas. The result is that those neighborhoods have now gentrified, with new residents, restaurants, shops and the like, requiring rents that the former residents cannot afford. The result is that many of the newer urban churches—and some of those that have a longer history in a particular city—are now congregations of mostly young creative types who live in the vicinity.

What will happen when urban hipster churches, like Hillsong, Oasis and Zoe, come into contact with other churches and urban ministries? (Indeed, do they ever come into contact or do they each maintain their own spheres of involvement?) And what will become of the Christian urban presence as neighborhoods gentrify and different churches and ministries are priced out? ■

“As urban areas have redeveloped, mostly younger professionals have moved into the newly built condos and lofts to take up residence in what were formerly “sketchy” areas. The result is that those neighborhoods have now gentrified, pricing out former residents. What will become of the Christian urban presence as neighborhoods gentrify and different churches and ministries are priced out?”

Five Trends to Watch in Religion in 2017: Culture Wars, Compounds & the Next Reformation

CRCC Staff
January 17, 2017

2016 was a year that no one could predict. Last year, we laid out several religion trends worth noting. To see how our forecasts matched with reality, give them a review.

The unpredictable nature of last year is not going to stop the Center for Religion and Civic Culture from trying our hand at laying out the landscape for 2017.

Here is what's on our mind for the coming year—trends written with a hint of satire and a touch of bite. Bring out the bellbottoms and disco balls, because many of our 2017 trends harken back to the 1970s, with a contemporary twist.

Culture War: The Empire Strikes Back

Emboldened by Donald Trump's winning the presidential election, watch for conservative white evangelicals to go full-tilt in the culture wars.

LGBT inclusion seemed inevitable a year ago. Our 2016 trends predicted, "An increasing number [of evangelical organizations] will show greater acceptance of LGBT individuals, in essence 'de-queering' their identities just as mainline Christians have done." At the same time, we predicted other groups would harden their opposition to LGBT rights. With Trump's triumph in the election, the latter group received a morale boost in the fights over "religious liberty" and transgender rights.

Abortion, long a firm wedge, will be reignited as the political fight, a nod to the Pence-ian bloc that helped elect Trump. Public education, vouchers for religious schools and school prayer also will rise in prominence.

Strong traditional evangelical institutions will drive change on these issues with strategic moves. While it may be true that white evangelicals are declining numerically, 2016 taught us not to discount their institutional and mobilizing power.

New Species of Evangelicals Discovered

If 2016 was the year of the death—and then surprising November 8 resurrection—of White Christian America, we predict that 2017 will bring the birth of a new type of evangelical Christian. Look forward to an article in *Science* magazine on this new species (ok, more likely a religion journal).

While more than 80 percent of white evangelical voters supported Trump, an identifiable dissenting group is no longer interested in a form of Christianity that is rooted in the culture war. This division has existed for a while, but in 2017, the split will become official, with the new group of people formerly clinging to the sides of the evangelical ship will cast off for uncharted seas and finally be forced to organize under a new name and banner lest they find themselves adrift and alone.

These "redemptionist" Christians (as we've been calling them) offer a personal relationship with Jesus, multi-ethnic and multi-class congregational life in urban centers and a politics that favors neither Republicans nor Democrats. Their theology and actions focuses not on the End Times, but rather on improving the spiritual and material lives of people in the here and now.

This new group, however, will not challenge white evangelicalism's political power on the national stage. Their goals are different from those of their progenitors in the faith, and their focus on loose networks is better suited to local action and relational influence, rather than institution building and the systematic wheeling and dealing.

It's our hope, at least, that this new group garners the respect of journalists, pundits and pollsters, who will have to stop referring to evangelicals as a monolith.

Comey announces new cult investigations

Whatever your feelings about politics, you can't avoid the impression that Americans of all political stripes are retreating to their silos.

The results? Cults and compounds.

For blue cities, the next year will entail a continuing turn to highly localized forms of civic engagement as well as an increasing penchant for highly personal and intimately curated spiritual experience. If hipsters aren't able to build a literal bubble around Brooklyn, they will seek out protection and authenticity by co-living (i.e., communes rebranded), starting urban farms, and using leftover food from those farms to make burritos for the homeless. Even as anti-institutional sentiment keeps this group away both from the voting booth and the pews, the uncertainty of the moment presents the opportunity for gurus to attract a following, whether it's the local activist with Bernie-esque charisma or the indigenously-trained shaman.

In red counties, meanwhile, disillusionment has already led people to crown Trump as their enlightened leader, the one who can solve all their problems. In the wake of his success, other "strong men" will also rise, mirroring or battling each other. They will embrace the resurgent belief in American exceptionalism, build their own walls and take advantage of relaxed gun control to stockpile weapons. The eventual fading of Trump's luster, however, will create a powder keg of let down, armed, isolated and angry folks.

No matter the group, our prediction reflects the disillusionment with the larger fractured culture. We already are seeing the turn toward the hyperlocal. When the hyperlocal becomes unsatisfying (you still exist in a larger context you can't control), intentional living spaces that create communities of affinity will find a more eager market. Throw in a charismatic leader, either liberal or conservative, and cults of personality can devolve into cults of control, with "groupthink" replacing individual reflection.

Marijuana advocates turn their attention to legalizing Ayahuasca

Take the previous trend, add consumerism and you have thriving markets for very different types of "illicit" behaviors. The following reflect the elevation of experience and consumerism in religion and spirituality.

With marijuana legal in 26 states and the District of Columbia, Ayahuasca and other hallucinogens are set to go mainstream. Will 2017 be the year that an industry develops around induced spiritual experiences? Already many celebrities and tech-preneurs are open about their use of Ayahuasca and sing its praises not only for mystical experiences of love and oneness, but for the productivity and creativity gains that can be applied to their work. Expect discretely advertised Ayahuasca rituals conducted like personal development seminars coming to a co-working space near you.

If that sounds a little too crunchy for spiritual seekers in the heartland, there will be ample opportunities for those with more conservative tastes to focus on individual experience and venture away from the offers of traditional institutions. For example, private reserves where guests can bag a rhino or fire a rocket-propelled grenade are already en vogue in the scrubland of Texas and the deserts outside of Las Vegas. Couple that trend toward the construction of crucibles for expressions of primal instinct with a newly energized conservative evangelical appetite for the End Times, and you've got the makings of a booming market for custom-made underground bunkers. Think "10 Cloverfield Lane" meets the gold-plated three-story penthouse in Trump Tower.

While Ayahuasca-nauts in Berkeley and Brooklyn might seem to have little in common with gun-toting "Duck Dynasty" fans in the Ozarks and Alabama, both groups embody trends that are playing out all across the United States: People are rejecting traditional institutions and focusing instead on the shared experiences of like-minded individuals as the source of

authority, meaning and community. Even in our dramatically polarized times, Americans have more in common with one another than most of us realize.

“3 ways to improve your life” posted on gym door, goes viral on Pinterest

Who has time to read 95 theses on a church door? The listicle that your gym manager posted in the locker room is so much more meaningful. Take a photo of it and share it online with #inspiration.

Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to church doors in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517. In 2017, Germany and the Vatican will hype up the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and the ecumenical progress that has been made in recent years. But for most people, particularly Millennials, the anniversary will hardly register.

Except for a small minority of Millennials who are very committed to their faiths, what unites young people on questions of religion is a general “meh” response. Sure, they may believe in God (however they define “God”) and have a highly individualized spiritual practice, but they demonstrate little interest in traditional religious ideas or organizations.

Some religious “nones” recently returned to mainline denominations, feeling wayward and lost after the Trump electoral victory. Yet, the problems with institutional religious life will not change. Once the therapeutic effect of congregational life is confronted by the difficulties of holding together communities of difference, these seekers will seek out their needs in other arenas.

Today, Martin Luther would need to jolt mainline congregations from their decline-inducing practices. But his 95 Theses are, well, religious ideas about institutions, making this anniversary doubly unappealing to religious nones.

Whatever sparks the next revolution in religion is sure to be much shorter than 95 theses to fit modern day attention spans.



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