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## Introduction

*The purpose of the Biennial Conferences on Religion and American Culture is to bring together scholars in the humanities, social sciences, seminaries, and professional schools who study religion in North America in order to discuss the big questions and themes we face in our fields. In 2009 we spent considerable time talking about the promises and challenges of interdisciplinary research. In 2011 we moved on to discuss the changing definitions of religion and culture, and what this means for the types of work we do. Conversations about changes in our understanding of religion—informed by various disciplines—can promote greater cross-fertilization of ideas and best practices in several fields. Our third meeting, in 2013, presented us the opportunity to think anew about old topics, as well as consider new developments in the field. In 2015, we returned to the big questions that shape our work, no matter our disciplinary training—globalization, war’s effects on civil religion and our interpretation of new religions, and competing models of pluralism and secularism. In 2017, the meeting highlighted challenges (rising “nones”) and opportunities (digital scholarship) for teaching about American religion, as well as the role of the state, diversity, and cultural production in shaping religion in America.*

*This year, we spent more time explicitly discussing teaching—both inside and outside the classroom. Additionally, sessions focused on the social and political moment we are in, as well as reflecting on the changing nature of higher education and our role in it. As previously, you will see in these Proceedings, the speakers heeded our call to be provocative, to push further, to debate, to learn together. The highly-participatory audience again threw itself into each session with that same spirit. Sessions were spirited—animated by the shared desire to move the conversations that develop slowly in our books and journals to new levels of frankness and cross-disciplinarity.*

*We continue to believe that a biennial conference dedicated to new perspectives informed by various disciplines will invigorate the broader field of American religious studies. We can and should learn from one another. These meetings help to lay the groundwork for future conversations about how to break down the disciplinary walls that have been erected when cross-disciplinary work is clearly needed as well as to identify when the discrete disciplines offer better understandings of some topics. It is our hope that these conferences will aid serious and sustained conversations among the disciplines and that they help to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of disciplinary boundaries. Indeed, we believe the annual meetings of the national disciplinary-based societies are enriched by this conversation.*

*The Sixth Conference on Religion and American Culture was held in Indianapolis in June 2017, consisting of a series of roundtable discussions through presentations by top scholars from a variety of perspectives. Nationally known scholars from different backgrounds participated in each session. The panelists sat, quite literally, at a round table in the center of the room, surrounded by scholars on risers so everyone could not only learn from the conversation but also participate in it.*

*These Proceedings include the papers that were read at the conference. What is always missing in these pages, however, are the lively conversations that marked each session. Indeed, the discussions continued over breaks, lunches, and dinners. As usual, new friends were made and fresh ideas were discovered. We look forward to continuing those conversations in 2021.*

*We wish to thank a number of people and institutions. First, we are grateful to the panelists who wrote such thoughtful pieces. We asked them to be direct and provocative, and they responded wonderfully. I am indebted to my colleagues Joseph Tucker Edmonds, Peter Thuesen, Brian Steensland, Amanda Friesen, and Art Farnsley who helped to facilitate the sessions. Finally, Lauren Schmidt and Nate Wynne planned and executed the entire conference, as well as the publication of these Proceedings. As with previous Biennial Conferences, we are deeply grateful for the support of Lilly Endowment Inc., which contributed generously toward the costs of the meeting and subvention of lodging costs, along with the IUPUI Arts and Humanities Institute.*

**Philip Goff**  
**Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture**

### **Teaching American Religion**

*For many teaching about religion in North America, it is a tale of two cities. While digital and local resources are richer than ever and many institutions value experiential learning, our students are quite different from a generation ago. Generally, they are less religious and know less about religion, which means for many courses we must recruit them to register and then focus more on content than we want, just to familiarize them with the material. What does this portend for American religious studies over the next decade, as enrollments in the humanities and some social sciences decrease? How do we attract, retain, and truly educate students in our field? What have you found resonates with a new generation prone to avoid the topic?*

**Kathleen Holscher**  
**University of New Mexico**

To attract students to “our” field, which for the purpose of this gathering we’re calling the field of American religion, we need to reach out to students where they are, or where they recognize themselves to be. This is especially the case for students from places and/or communities that have traditionally been marginal to the field. Educating these students means helping them to develop ways of thinking about religion that account for their own experiences of place and community, while also bringing them to ask new questions—questions that bear upon places and communities beyond their own.

Often this approach translates to meeting students first *not* on the terrain of “religion” (because increasingly students don’t know themselves or their worlds in terms of religion), but instead on different terrain, through other categories they *do* recognize as bearing upon those worlds. In my teaching, this meeting usually happens within courses titled “Religion and [...].” Within such courses, my job becomes twofold: 1) to introduce students to religion as a thing worth thinking about in relation to categories they *do* know as important, and 2) to show them ways in which their own located-ness, which they often understand to be amid or near those “important” categories, can produce skills for knowing about religion as such, as a thing that happens across contexts.

I’ll use the example of my students to draw attention to the regionally varied, and also steadily changing, demographics of college students in the United States, and to corresponding differences—and changes—in the categories and topics students find relevant. There are broad generational shifts, but there are also differences that come with student populations that are less white, less descended European East Coast immigrants, than ever before. I’m interested in the implications of these differences for introducing students to—and helping them find a place within—a field held together still under the presumption of something called “American religion”.

I teach at the University of New Mexico, which is located in Albuquerque. UNM has the federal designation of a “minority-serving institution.” My students are about half Latinox (mainly *Nuevomexicano*, but also students with families who have emigrated from places like Chihuahua). In addition, between five and ten percent of my students are citizens of Native nations. About a third of my students are Anglo or white. Nearly all my students come from within New Mexico. Most don’t speak Spanish or Diné or Tewa because their great-grandparents or grandparents were required to attend English-only schools, including many schools run by churches. In addition, most of my students have not traveled widely in the United States. This is in part

due to resources—New Mexico has one of the highest rates of poverty in the nation.

My students often feel distant toward, or ambivalent about, religion. But they almost all enjoy—and find value in—thinking and talking about the place they come from. My students arrive in class wanting to try out, to defend, and to develop their own senses about New Mexico, and its communities and its cultures, in conversation with other students, and with scholars they read, and with me. Because New Mexico is a region that’s been colonized twice over in the last four centuries, prevailing senses of place among different groups of students differ from one another, and sometimes they conflict in the classroom. But generally speaking, UNM students respond when you “meet them” locally. Courses with “New Mexico” or “the Southwest” in the title enroll well.

When I teach, I try to meet students with content they can relate to life in and around New Mexico. I try to introduce them to religion as something deeply relevant to *that* place, and I try to show them how studying religion opens up topics they recognize as bearing on their lives in new ways. Students also come to think critically about “religion” through engaging local content. New Mexican content is useful, for example, for training students to talk about the politics embedded in the display of religion, including as “public heritage,” and in its commodification via tourism. Relatedly, my students are able to think critically about the study of religion as it’s happened across colonial projects. Sometimes my students arrive with suspicions about how religion—as part of culture—is studied, viewed, and consumed. They might not have scholarly language for talking these processes through, but they come with stories, for example, about the economic disparity between Santa Fe’s plaza (where religion is often on display), and neighborhoods in the south of that city. And they come with an accompanying sense of the different ways the same religion—Catholicism, or maybe Native spiritualities—functions across those different contexts.

Local content also provokes students; it pulls and pushes them, and it motivates them to try out different forms of analysis. On one hand, my students are willing to linger with phenomenological curiosity on the religious worlds of people who they know as related, if even distantly, to themselves and their own communities. On the other hand, some students arrive knowing the damage religion has inflicted within New Mexico. Students who know that damage through stories about mission schools told to them by relatives, for example, talk about it with their classmates. And they look for ways of understanding religion that remain honest to those stories. I want to avoid New Mexican exceptionalism here; I suspect colleagues across the country

are meeting more and more students who, insofar as they “know” religion, know it through damage it inflicts. But, certainly teaching UNM students whose stories about religion are stories of family loss, even as I also teach students who know religion in terms of family tradition, and—yes—personal faith, has made me aware that I need to give them skills to parse these different sides of the coin.

I’ll conclude with two questions for the group’s consideration. First, what are the courses you teach that introduce students to religion via other categories—whether they be categories of place, categories of identity, etc.—that encompass things your students are invested in learning about? How has approaching religion in relation to those categories determined the skills your students acquire, the ways in which they come to think critically past their own experiences, and about religion as such? And second, what are the implications of this approach, the “Religion and [...]” approach, for the field of American religion? One thing that does *not* work at UNM is simply adding New Mexican content to survey courses on American religion. My students are alienated (an alienation that registers with eyes-glazed-over boredom) by East Coast-centric framing, and by themes emphasized still in textbooks on American religious history. They demonstrate savvy skepticism toward “diversity” models that structure such surveys. So, given the changing demographics of college students across the country, where will a commitment to meeting students “where they are” leave the field of American religion?

**Carolyn M. Jones Medine**  
**University of Georgia**

Patricia O’Connell Killen in her “Introduction” to *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest* names that region the “None Zone.” Killen argues that “None”:

represents the tendency of people to act independently in matters religious [that] has created an ongoing challenge for faith communities in which history and theological heritage are significant. It is difficult to transmit traditions of belief, practice, and sensibility to people on the move, disconnected from larger social networks, and often disinterested in historic theological traditions and skeptical of institutional authority.<sup>1</sup>

She goes on to say that throughout the region’s history, “individuals have joined, dropped out [of], and switched organization affiliation.”<sup>2</sup> And, she points out that these practices are not unique to the Northwest. Killen puts her finger on the climate that has led to a decline in the interest in the Religious Studies major for many of us. In this short reflection, I will consider the “Nones” and how they are located in our classrooms and the issues around the major and the humanities; second, I will try to say a few things about how we might teach to draw these Nones, who, at this juncture, also are Generation Z students, into our classrooms.

The “Nones” are counterbalanced in our classrooms, by, for many of us, an overwhelming Christian presence. As Caryn D. Riswold writes in “Teaching the College ‘Nones,’” Christian privilege means that when these students enter my classroom at the University of Georgia—a large, public, Southern, flagship—they expect that a religion class will operate from a position of Christian normativity common to and dominant in their location—for example, for me, Baptist, Methodist, Evangelical and non/inter-denominational. This suggests that “religion” means that the class will talk about God and that students will share a common understanding; that most students will share religious experiences and beliefs; and, that any other religion taught will be about “the other.”<sup>3</sup> This “othering” alone may alienate Millennials and Generation Z, who are less religious and more progressive on issues of inclusion and diversity.<sup>4</sup>

Generation Z students are those born between 1995-2015. As an example of their historical memory, I was teaching #BlackLivesMatter this spring, and most in my class were in eighth grade when police shot Michael Brown in 2014. They are, as a group, considered to be cynical and entrepreneurial, probably because their formative memories are of the economic downturn; they are multi-tasking technology users, who have had cell phones from an early

age, who have short attention spans, and who absorb a great deal of information quickly.<sup>5</sup> They have a deep sense of empathy, and they are “generally opposed to challenging others’ perspectives.”<sup>6</sup> They are also very anxious and often depressed.<sup>7</sup>

Even as they are considered to be “post-Christian,” like the Millennials, they have a complex relationship to religion: even among the Nones, 68% still say they believe in God.<sup>8</sup> I think that is why, as Amber Hu writes about Religion majors at Yale, majors have declined, but the “classes remain widely”—and I would say, for my department, wildly—popular.<sup>9</sup> Data suggests that Philosophy and Religious Studies degrees have declined by 15%.<sup>10</sup> Students, however, are interested in pluralism, “in new and different religions,” and religion is in the news daily, making students interested in how to analyze religions.<sup>12</sup>

How might we teach to as to attract these students? I offer three points for conversation.

First, we should focus on developing Religious Studies as a complementary double major. We see many departments—if you Google search, Elon University, Middlebury, and University of Arizona come up immediately—promoting the double major as a way to add dimension and depth to a first major. This strategy points students towards interdisciplinary studies, which many universities are working towards, but also intercultural studies, which adds a practical dimension to interdisciplinary thinking. Intercultural method focuses on intersections and overlaps of cultures where energy and tensions are enacted—what Mary Louise Pratt called “contact zones.”<sup>13</sup> In these interstices and at these intersections, people may combine, in action and practice, more than one culture at the same time, often without admitting of a privileged point of view.

This mode of being seems to me to “fit” the “Nones,” many of whom are involved in religious practices—like yoga and meditation, for example—but do not see this as in tension with, if Pew is right, believing in God. Ming Xie argues that such “mixed” realities open us to a comparativity that can be epistemologically critical: it both knows and knows how we know, seeing the framing of knowledge and opening ourselves to self-reflexivity. The goal of intercultural work is to see oneself while seeing the “other.” This marks a re-seeing of the “self.”<sup>14</sup> Eighteen to twenty-one-year-olds are obsessed with self, so an approach that generates self-reflexivity in relation to their own practices and those of others is attractive to them, and we can engage in these practices to refine their thought.



Intercultural thought marks the work of the teacher as it opens us to being conscious of the objects we study and how we study them, which is right in line with the late Jonathan Z. Smith's argument that we "invent" religion to study it—which leads me to theory:

Second, we need to rethink the ways we deploy theory in the classroom. With theory, we may have gone too far—not in our research, but in our teaching in some places, including mine. I love theory. I read Emmanuel Levinas for fun. Though, however, I agree with the late Jonathan Z. Smith that the scholar creates religion to study, I know that religion exists in the world in what people do and believe. With Russell McCutcheon, I would argue that I am not the caretaker of those beliefs and practices,<sup>15</sup> but I think that I do need to understand them in relation to their adherents and to how they function in public spaces—and I would argue that that is what many, at least of my, students are interested in and that is what draws them to the classroom.

The meaning of what theory is itself may need to be rethought. I turn to bell hooks' "Theory as Liberatory Practice" to understand this. hooks talks about the difficulties of her childhood, how she lived "without a sense of home."<sup>16</sup> For her, theory, the "experience of critical thinking, of reflection and analysis," became a way of "making sense of what [is] happening" and of imagining "possible futures, a place where life could be lived differently."<sup>17</sup> This is the "otherwise" that Levinas describes. Theory, like religion, emerges from particular locations, from particular social situations, and travels.<sup>18</sup> Religions imagine "otherwise"—at least they begin that way with the founders—and movements in religions, like religion and ecology, feminism and religion, race and religion and so on, continue that transgressive, imaginative thinking. For Generation Z, and their interests in social issues, this is a way to draw them to the classroom.

Third, we may need to give them something they are fascinated by to get them interested in other elements of Religious Studies. My Religion and Literature course functions in this way, as does our World Religions course. The World Religions course is one that has come under great scrutiny in current discourse, both in terms of the questions of "whose world" we are teaching and what "religion" is—and for good reasons. I would recommend a 2012 *Teaching Theology and Religion* Forum, with Reid Locklin and others, addressing Tomoko Masuzawa's insights on the World Religions course, for a discussion of the issues.<sup>19</sup> Yet, the "resurgence" of Islam and a popular interest in Buddhism<sup>20</sup> and in practices from other religions, among other things, has created a demand for understanding the world's religions, and World Religions may be one course—judiciously executed—that can draw in students. Rather than doing the run-through from Hinduism to Islam, one may develop other approaches. One of my graduate students, Drew Craver, for example, taught the course focused on

ancient mythologies, using, instead of the usual textbook, a world mythology textbook to study ancient mythologies from each continent. He, then, used supplementary materials to show students present day people whose religious practice is informed by a belief in those mythologies. This questioned the issues of "religion" and "mythology." The final project offered students a lot of freedom and variety. One student, for example, compared Norse myths with the new Norse myth in the *Thor* movies. One compared Norse and Celtic roles of women. And another compared the morality system of what we call "myth" with "religion," particularly Christianity.

Another of my students, Katherine Daley-Bailey, who has written and presented on how World Religion textbooks construct, for example, the notion of "human nature," asks students, at the end of the course, to critique the textbook, to analyze its approaches and biases. This is one way of teaching information about religions, that students want, but also addressing the theoretical questions about whose world and whose definition of religion.

Another way may be to focus on a transdisciplinary approach that interests our students, like gender or feminist thought, postcolonial thought,<sup>21</sup> globalization,<sup>22</sup> ecology or meditative practices. One may work thematically. For example, Cia Sautter describes her course called "World Religions: Dance and Music," that focuses on how people move in the world religions, "as a basic way people express their values and faith."<sup>23</sup> Such approaches open the multicultural approach that preserves borders between traditions to border crossings between religions and to intercultural understandings within religions themselves.

My C. S. Lewis and Tolkien course is one that I could teach every semester. Students of the Harry Potter generation are rediscovering Tolkien and Lewis. While students come to the course for the fantasy element and, for some, because it is a Christianity-focused course, they get introduced to Religion and Literature's issues and approaches; to problems and approaches in narrative; to Lewis' more philosophical readings of Christianity and to Tolkien's Catholicism; and, to both their emphases on courage and other virtues, self-emptying (*kenosis*), fellowship and friendship, and other ideas—some of which are Christian themes my Christian students have never encountered in their churches. Many students become majors after taking this course and, thereby, study religions other than Christianity and encounter multiple theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of religion.

### For Further Thought

I think that studying religion as a discipline can address the questions and resistances this generation bring to religion, not to convert, which is not our job, but to open exploration and thought about the larger world in which we

all live. Our students are at the natural age to question: I think it is their job to doubt and to find their own ways of being, even if that means leaving their childhood religions and all religions behind. But, in studying religion, they can find that it raises and offers answers to their broader concerns about how they might live. For example, they are involved deeply in digital forms of personal relation that raise questions about identity and how to live authentically and well. They struggle to figure out how to address the challenges of their generation. I think that issues and questions that current students raise are good for us. Publications by Teagle and in the AAC&U journal, *Liberal Education*, argue that the Religious Studies major is in flux<sup>24</sup> as it faces the changing educational landscape. This is, I think, a good thing, forcing us to grow as teachers and scholars who also are not afraid to interrogate what the humanities and Religious Studies are and can do at this moment in our history.<sup>25</sup>

This Group conducts interviews to understand faith and culture. They work with numerous organizations, like the Salvation Army, and with numerous businesses.

9. “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” Pew Research Center (October 9, 2012), <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>. Pew also found that there is more interest in practices like yoga, and that more than half say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth (58%), while more than a third classify themselves as “spiritual” but not “religious” (37%), and one-in-five (21%) say they pray every day. In addition, most religiously unaffiliated Americans think that churches and other religious institutions benefit society by strengthening community bonds and aiding the poor. They also see organized religion as too concerned with money and power.

10. Amber Hu, “Fewer Students Pursue Religious Studies Degrees,” *Yale News* (April 5, 2018), <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2018/04/05/fewer-students-pursue-religious-studies-degrees/>.

11. Michael T. Nietzel, “Whither the Humanities: The Ten-Year Trend in College Majors,” *Forbes* (January 7, 2019), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelt Nietzel/2019/01/07/whither-the-humanities-the-ten-year-trend-in-college-majors/#74f736cb64ad>. Nietzel lists majors that increased:

- Health professions more than doubled, from 91,973 to 228,896 graduates. This was the largest absolute increase of any major and was almost tenfold more the number of health profession graduates in 1970.
- Parks, recreation and fitness studies doubled its graduates from 25,490 to 50,918.
- Homeland security and law enforcement graduates increased 73%.
- Communications technologies increased graduates by 62%.
- Agriculture and natural resources grew 61%.
- Biological and biomedical sciences added 43,142 graduates, an increase of 61%.
- Engineering saw a 60% increase in its graduates.
- Multi and interdisciplinary studies were also up 60%.
- Public administration and social services majors increased 57%.
- Mathematics and statistics saw an increase of 54%.

Some estimates about the salaries of those majoring in Religious Studies are not helpful. For example, Stacy Rapacon’s “15 Worst College Majors for a Lucrative Career” in *Kiplinger*, only measured salaries of those who entered religious careers, like directors of Religious Education or clergy. They did not look beyond these careers. <https://www.kiplinger.com/slideshow/business/T012-S001-worst-college-majors-for-a-lucrative-career-2019/index.html>.

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1. Patricia O’Connell Killen, “Introduction,” in Patricia O’Connell Killen and mark Silk, eds., *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004), 13.

2. *Ibid.*, 13.

3. Caryn D. Riswold, “Teaching the ‘Nones’: Christian Privilege and the Religion Professor,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 18:2 (April 2015): 137-138.

4. See Kim Parker, Nikki Graf and Ruth Igielnik, “Generation Z Looks Like Millennials on Key Social and Political Issues,” Pew Research Center (January 17, 2019), <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/01/17/generation-z-looks-a-lot-like-millennials-on-key-social-and-political-issues/>.

5. Steve Robertson, Blog: “Generation Z Characteristics and Traits That Explain the Way they Learn,” Julian Krinsky Camps and Programs (July 25, 2018), <https://info.jkcp.com/blog/generation-z-characteristics>.

6. See “Gen Z and Morality: What Teens Believe (So Far),” from Barna Research, *Gen Z*, <https://www.barna.com/research/gen-z-morality/>.

7. Juliana Menasce Horowitz and Nikki Graf, “Most U. S. Teens See Anxiety and Depression as a Major Problem Among Their Peers,” Pew Research Center (February 20, 2019), <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/02/20/most-u-s-teens-see-anxiety-and-depression-as-a-major-problem-among-their-peers/>.

8. Kelly Frazier, “Gen Z is the First Post-Christian Generation” (February 6, 2018), <https://www.worldreligionnews.com/religion-news/z-gen-atheist-generation>.

12. Hu.

13. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 7ff.

<sup>14</sup> Ming Xie, *Conditions of Comparison: Reflections on Comparative Intercultural Inquiry* (New York: Continuum, 2011), and Wei Liu's review, "Exploration of the Intercultural," *Journal of Modern Literature* 37:1 (Fall 2013): 194-195). The AACU Study and the Religion Major from the Teagle Report suggested that the religion major is intercultural.

15. Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redefining the Public Study of Religion* (New York: SUNY Press, 2001). In this early book, McCutcheon calls for a "redescriptive scholarship" that emerges from the work of Jonathan Z. Smith.

16. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 61ff.

17. *Ibid.*, 61.

18. Edward Said, "Traveling Theory," in *The World, The Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 226-247.

19. Reid B. Locklin, Tracy Tiemeier, and Johann M. Vento, "Teaching World Religions without Teaching 'World Religions'" *Teaching Theology and Religion* 15:2 (April 2012): 159-181.

20. See, for example, Peter N. Gregory, "Describing the Elephant: Buddhism in America," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 11.2 (Summer 2001): 233-263.

21. Steven W. Ramey, "Critiquing Borders: Teaching About Religions in a Postcolonial World," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 9:4 (2006): 211-220. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9647.2006.00286.x>.

22. Jill DeTemple, Home is My Area Code: Thinking About, Teaching, and Learning Globalization in Introductory World Religions Classes, *Teaching Theology & Religion* 15:1 (2012): 61-71.

23. Cia Sautter, "Teaching the Dance of World Religions," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 8:3 (2005): 176-183. <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.proxy-remote.galib.uga.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&sid=00e47d4d-e5d0-445e-a32c-ec352b090240%40sdc-v-sessmgr02>.

24. "The Religion Major and Liberal Education--A White Paper," Teagle/AAR White Paper, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/03/14/study-shows-87-decline-humanities-bachelors-degrees-2-years>. The American Academy of Religion, "The Religious Studies Major and Liberal Education," *Liberal Education* 95:2 (Spring 2009), <https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/religious-studies-major-and-liberal-education>.

25. See Benjamin Schmidt, "The Humanities Are in Crisis," *The Atlantic* (23 August 2018), [www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/the-humanities-face-a-crisisof-confidence/567565/](http://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/the-humanities-face-a-crisisof-confidence/567565/). Schmidt writes, "In the top 30 universities, according to *U.S. News & World Report*, there are now about as many degrees awarded in computer science as in history, English, languages, philosophy, religion, area studies, and linguistics put together.

**Douglas Thompson**  
Mercer University

For many teaching about religion in North America, it is a tale of two cities. While digital and local resources are richer than ever and many institutions value experiential learning, our students are quite different from a generation ago. Generally, they are less religious and know less about religion, which means for many courses we must recruit them to register and then focus more on content than we want, just to familiarize them with the material. What does this portend for American religious studies over the next decade, as enrollments in the humanities and some social sciences decrease? How do we attract, retain, and truly educate students in our field? What have you found resonates with a new generation prone to avoid the topic?

I have spent the past several months thinking about how we need to talk as much about institutional structures as we do about pedagogy. The inner workings of our institutions effect student retention as much as our classroom presence in the teaching of American religion. But let me be clear, at Mercer we don't have to attract students to courses on religion; students seek those courses, particularly in history. The way students think about those courses, however, has changed significantly in the past twenty years because parents and society have told them what we do is not useful.

Several years ago, and under the purview of our southern studies program, I offered a special topics course titled Southern Jesus. The course places the construction of the image of Jesus at its heart. Using Ed Blum and Paul Harvey's *The Color of Christ* and sections from Harvey's Lamar lectures, *Jesus, Moses, and the Trickster*, I guide the students through the many creations of Jesus that have been made in the region. On the first day, my students are not thrown by white or black images of Jesus, since the South lives its two-race life on its sleeves. Vietnamese or Muskogee renderings usually strike students as unusual because it is often the first time they have seen those images. But when I post an image of a first-century Palestinian man, they all say that is not what Jesus looks like. At that point, I have a way to talk about their assumptions, either through faith traditions or the use of popular culture, to examine the construction of religion often in their own image.

The course engages biblical hermeneutics, literary theories, visual studies, and social and cultural history. We examine the social contexts in American history that create notions about Jesus. The radical Jesus found in the Gospels led early separatists in Virginia to embraced equality in congregations when they could not change eighteenth century Virginia's political culture. The near-disappearance of Jesus in biblical defenses of slavery reemerged in the progressive era as a white middle-class business man.

Students produce a final assignment in the unessay vein that lets them explore a modern representation of Jesus that uses all of the tools we have engaged throughout the term. Students often say that they had no idea how much of themselves they had placed in their image of Jesus until they took the class.

My context lets me offer this course, so I am not suggesting we all teach Southern Jesus. The bigger issue for my department and college is the discussion of the humanities as a drain on society. Rather than suggest how we can bring students into our classes with neat special topics, we need to think more deliberately about how institutional obstacles inhibit students from taking our courses not because they are uninterested but because we no longer appear relevant to university administrators—at the very moment our daily news feeds suggests what we do may be the most important thing for our society.

The religion department at Mercer more than two decades ago made the decision to become a service department. With seven full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty and fewer than fifteen majors, one of the ways departments show the need for replacement hires is through service to the general education program. In our old Gen Ed this plan worked well. Students from Georgia Baptist churches as well as other Christian denominations could fulfill Gen Ed by taking Old Testament and New Testament courses, at least until 2005 when our ties to the GBC were broken. When we revised our Gen Ed almost a decade ago, the religion department lost their hold on the religion component in the Gen Ed, though they still offer a significant number of OT and NT courses.

The history department, however, has three people, including me, trained in American religious history. All three use religion as a focal point for teaching American history. This week we developed a two-hundred level course for the Gen Ed titled "Religion in the American Past." All three of us have tenure and the recent climb to 50 majors and minors to our area suggests we will be teaching American religious history for the next fifteen to twenty years. Our job is to figure out how to attract students—some seventy percent who enter as pre-health something—not just to the humanities but to the history department specifically. We actively recruit high school students as a department, working with the admissions office to reach out to every student who comes on campus showing any interest in history. Our plan is to grow majors from the ground up and this past year we entered eleven self-identified majors. Currently, we are slated for seven this coming fall. In our context that is significant. I am aware that my context is not that of everyone in this room, but the institutional pressures

and the creativity of a faculty play a significant role in any discussion of this topic.

While outlining my context may not be helpful to those of you in different teaching environments, I hope to spark some discussion about the position of religion outside the denominational frameworks. It appears to me that public institutions may have it easier in one respect since they generally attract students to religion outside the idea of preparing for ministry. But private institutions with continued denominational affiliations have continued to operate as if the model will just evolve rather than be proscriptive in moving away from minister training. I realize the public universities fight different battles regarding their legitimacy in institutions funded with public money, but in our central budget system, we fight a similar battle.

None of the hiring lines in our departments belong to us. We have to put an argument forward every year for why a department should be allowed to rehire a particular line. Departments that cast their lot with Gen Ed fair well but very few of those students ever move beyond a survey level engagement with the material. All of us think the study of religion in the American social system is important, but calls for the importance of this field of study appear to fall into the abyss of corporate thinking about higher education. We are lucky at Mercer since three history faculty members embed religion in their surveys and upper-level courses. But I am aware of how tenuous this scenario appears. Moving departmental focus is not enough, we have to understand and engage administrators who only decide based on seat-time numbers what is worthy or not. Often, they are chasing some fad, wasting money in the process. Students in seats creates enormous pressure on administrators to fill those teaching positions. In twittersphere and op-ed columns, the end for the humanities and religion in particular is near, but how do our departments/institutions adapt when the structural assumptions that built them more than a century ago are no longer present? I don't think the sky is falling, but administrative pieces behind our curriculum development need to be accounted for in our discussions.

In a move unusual for a RAAC presentation, I will give a brief biography of me and Mercer to set the teaching context that dominates my life. I am a religious studies-trained historian, an odd beast in many ways though less so in this room. Trained to pursue the academic study of religion unattached from denominational primacy, I do so with the historian's lens first and foremost. My position at Mercer is no less strange. In a six-person history department, I am the only person who holds a religious studies Ph.D. I am an American religious historian who teaches western civ surveys, twentieth century world history, American at War, and modern American and southern history. Outside my department, I teach the final course in our Great Books sequence. I teach a 4/3 load at a Doctoral Universities: High

Research Activity institution. No program in our division has graduate students.

Mercer University is a private, comprehensive national university with thirteen divisions across eight campuses in Georgia. I teach in the original division—the College of Liberal Arts (CLA). Our R-1/2 status comes via our pharmacy and theology schools, which produce Ph.Ds. Until 2005, Mercer was affiliated with the Georgia Baptist Convention. Our president hopes to maintain our religious identity but that looks less possible with each passing year because denominational affiliation attracts students. Our largest religiously identified student population is Catholic. Muslim students make up a similar percentage as Baptist-identified students. More of a mechanical issue but will play an important role in the questions I raise today, the university operates under a centralized budget that faculty have no control over.

I also cannot say that my experience with students' built-in capacity to talk and think about religion is shared by everyone in this room. But in my context, students want to talk about religion. They may even pray for my soul in the process, but it is not a problem to get them registered for classes.

While studying at the University of Virginia in religious studies, the history students would ask why we were in religious studies. When we started asking questions in seminars, they understood that we were interested in the religious underpinnings of events not just labor or economic history. But in religious studies, the theology/ethics students asked a similar question and realized a similar response when we contextualize everything about theology or ethics.

The pressure on courses making and then filling to capacity is immense. The split from GBC liberated us in one sense but hampered our offerings in another sense. The religion department had served for most of its history as a preacher training department and feeding program to Southern Baptist seminaries. In the 1990s that focus disappeared, and has played a significant role in the department's struggle to adjust. But in the College, the religion department is not the only place where the study of religion gets taught.

### **Translating Scholarship**

*In our current context, where universities and colleges are changing and are under pressure to prove their worth, this panel seeks to focus on the applied aspects of our work. While all acknowledge the value of learning for its own sake, we understand the need to be able to explain how our work has direct or indirect implications for policy and practice to the state, school stakeholders, religious organizations, or funders. What are the current uses of religion scholarship? What areas do we need to further develop? How do we prove our value beyond what students turn in during the semester?*

**Heath W. Carter**  
**Valparaiso University**

Every so often a prominent scholar issues a broadside against colleagues in the humanities, arguing that runaway specialization and opaque prose lie at the root of the guilds' current predicament. The liberal arts are not so much being marginalized as marginalizing themselves, or so the argument goes. As Harvard historian Jill Lepore contended in a November 2018 interview with the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "The academy is largely responsible for its own peril. The retreat of humanists from public life has had enormous consequences for the prestige of humanistic ways of knowing and understanding the world."<sup>1</sup> Just last month, meanwhile, the president of the American Historical Association, John R. McNeill, published an essay in *Perspectives* complaining about the pervasiveness of "undemocratic" jargon in contemporary historical writing.<sup>2</sup> Such pieces inevitably give way to roaring waves of frustration and indignation in the more scholarly corners of the social media world.

The backlash is, in my view, largely merited. While I have certainly been in seminar rooms where the conversation veered deep into what many non-specialists would consider the arcane, far more salient is the fact that we are living through a golden age of public scholarship. It is hard to imagine that there have ever been more scholars working more diligently to connect with broader audiences than are doing so today. I could spend the rest of my time citing examples drawn exclusively from the world of American religious studies, but a handful will have to do:

1. There are any number of individual scholars, including everyone from Anthea Butler to John Fea, Kate Bowler to Eddie Glaude, and many, many more, who have built powerful digital platforms which they use to disseminate critical perspectives on the American religious landscape.
2. There is an even wider range of scholars that contribute regularly to popular venues. I am never surprised to wake up in the morning to a new piece in the *New York Times*, the *Atlantic*, the *Washington Post*, etc, that was either written by a colleague or that features their expertise. I've heard colleagues talking about their books on *Fresh Air* and *On Being*, not to mention a tremendous variety of other podcasts, many launched by fellow scholars seeking to—you guessed it—reach a broader audience.
3. There are group blogs that aim to engage wider publics, including some oriented specifically around our fields, such as the Religion in American History blog, as well as others which have wider purviews but which sometimes feature excellent related content. I'm thinking, for example, of the African American Intellectual History Society's *Black Perspectives*, which

last year hosted a tremendous forum on James Cone's life and legacies.<sup>3</sup>

4. There are online journals of news and commentary, including sites such as Religion & Politics, a project of Washington University in St. Louis's John C. Danforth Center, and Sightings, sponsored by the University of Chicago Divinity School's Martin Marty Center.
5. There is an astounding array of digital portals, which bring primary texts and cutting-edge scholarship to teachers, researchers, students, and many other publics beyond. It's easy to while away the hours on the Faith in the City site that Chris Cantwell created a number of years ago in partnership with colleagues at the Newberry Library, and which highlights Chicago's Religious Diversity in the Era of the World's Fair. The same is true of the American Religious Sounds project, which Amy DeRogatis and Isaac Weiner have recently launched in conjunction with a variety of other colleagues at their respective institutions.<sup>4</sup>

I could go on, but suffice it to say, we in American religious studies have thrown ourselves headlong into the work of translation.

And it's a good thing we have. There are any number of different ways to think about our value, but in my brief comments today I want to focus especially on one: namely, that our work is indispensable to the present and future of democracy. My remarks on this front will reflect my training as a historian, though I believe this claim to be more broadly applicable and hope we can reflect on it from the perspective of other disciplines in the conversation to follow.

There is little doubt that the public's understanding of the past is a key battleground in the ongoing struggle for a democratic society. At its best, history can sharpen our sense of how we got here and thereby leaven conversations about how we should move forward. But history can also be dangerous. When rendered irresponsibly, stories about the past can readily function as bulwarks of oppression. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall explores these dynamics in her essential 2005 *Journal of American History* essay, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," documenting how, over the course of the last generation, the opponents of the black freedom struggle have engaged in a concerted campaign to capture its history. If, as Hall writes, "the movement's meaning has been distorted and reified by a New Right bent on reversing its gains," she seeks in that piece to "trace the contours of what I take to be a more robust, more progressive, and *truer* story."<sup>5</sup>

The problem, of course, is that, when it comes to any number of issues related to the study of American

religion, our society is swimming in histories of the dangerous sort. In broad circulation right now are mythological pasts that frame settler colonialism in the terms of American exceptionalism; that erase vast white Christian participation in enslavement, Jim Crow, mass incarceration, voter suppression, and more; that construe sexual binaries invented in the mid-twentieth century as natural; that paint Islam as threat and immigrants as un-American; and the list goes on. If there is to be any hope for American democracy, then we need the truer stories that emerge through painstaking scholarly work to be the ones that are centered in public debate.

Our ongoing commitment to the digital public square will be vital to any such centering, but in closing I want to suggest that there remains great need for our expertise in the brick-and-mortar public squares where decisions about the future of our schools, libraries, religious organizations, neighborhoods, cities, and more are made each and every day. If you haven't attended a school board or city council meeting recently, you may be surprised to discover how often themes broadly related to our scholarship surface in such contexts. Even at the most local level, the decisions made at such meetings have significant implications for people's lives and so the need for truer stories is great. I could go on and on about the ways I've seen dangerous history deployed in public meetings in Valparaiso. But I could also tell stories about colleagues who have jumped into the fray, speaking up on issues ranging from civil rights to school curricula to Muslim prayer. In so doing they have translated their scholarship in ways that have changed the life of one small Midwestern city for the better. Such gains are exceedingly modest and fragile, to be sure, which is also to say that, if democracy is going to survive us, we will need a whole lot more of the same.

[communicate?fb\\_comment\\_id=2230325517063836\\_2248081561954898](https://www.facebook.com/communicate?fb_comment_id=2230325517063836_2248081561954898).

3. The James Cone forum is available via <https://www.aaihs.org/tag/james-cone-forum/>.
4. See <https://dcc.newberry.org/collections/faith-in-the-city#to-save-the-city-protestant-responses-to-urbanization> and <https://religioussounds.osu.edu/>.
5. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91, No. 4 (March 2005): 1235.

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1. Evan Goldstein, "The Academy is Largely Responsible for its own Peril: Jill Lepore on writing the story of America, the rise and fall of the fact, and how women's intellectual authority is undermined," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 13 November 2018, available via <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Academy-Is-Largely/245080>.
  2. John R. McNeill, "Jargon in History Writing Shuts Out the Public: The Point Isn't to Sound Smart. The Point is to Communicate," *Perspectives*, 20 May 2019, available via <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2019/jargon-in-history-writing-shuts-out-the-public-the-point-isnt-to-sound-smart-the-point-is-to->



**Robert A. Orsi**  
**Northwestern University**

A few comments about the prompt first: I acknowledge the contemporary realities it references, but I regret its defensive tone, in particular the phrase “proving our value.” I fear this may work to orient this session towards narrowly pragmatic, conformist, or ameliorative horizons, as in, “the study of religion is good for students interested in finance because it gives them another metric for assessing risk and value in foreign countries” or “the study of religion makes a positive contribution to civic life.” Both may be true, but neither is the purpose of the study of religion. I also believe in teaching to the times, in finding ways of addressing urgent contemporary issues from within the subject matter, and theories and methods, of our scholarship and teaching. But one of the assumptions of the prompt seems to be that scholarship, looking outwards beyond what we teach in the classroom, will inevitably make positive, generative, contributions to public life. It is necessary to recall as we open this conversation that just as often American scholarship has contributed to harm, oppression, and hierarchy, in the present and in the past. We do not need a return to positivism. I take it as axiomatic that scholarship that flatters power is the scholarship most valued and celebrated outside the academy, and too often inside it too, and I am not so sure that we get to prove our value in most circumstances as that powerful interests tell us what our value is to them.

For instance, I think the determined effort of many US religious historians in the 1980s and 1990s to render white evangelicals respectable, minimizing the dangerous inheritances of racist supremacy, misogyny, and sexual violence, with a view to prying open the so-called “naked public square” for the entry of “Christian values” into public life is a truly problematic legacy of our scholarship. Do not misunderstand me: I realize that important work was done contesting such a benign view, and even more is being done now; nevertheless, a strong apologetic impulse (re)entered the study of American religions in this period, framing itself as a form of democratic responsibility. Claiming an opponent is evil is dangerous to the democratic public sphere; it speaks of a divergent ontology, not merely a different ethic or politics. To put this another way, making Billy Graham respectable may have been a contribution to the recuperation of an explicitly conservative evangelical voice in the public sphere, but it eroded our capacity to speak about Frank Graham in other than the language of the anomalous.

As these comments suggest, I believe it’s mistaken to conceptualize the direct or indirect consequences of our work as a simple linear movement: our research → social implications and value that are immediate and clear, which

may be offered to “stakeholders” (medical institutions, businesses, government entities, and so on). All the bodies named in the prompt have their own interests and agendas, most often backed by substantial financial resources, and the horizon of what is thinkable in such contexts is defined by these interests. Our scholarship does not speak to the needs of various stakeholders without those stakeholders having an increasingly constitutive influence on our scholarship. *Speaking to* not infrequently, and perhaps inevitably, becomes *speaking for*. When we translate, we are translated in turn; this is not a one-way transaction. Most broadly, then, what is at stake in this session is the question of what sort of place a college or university is, what these environments make possible, sayable, that might not be elsewhere on the social landscape they share with other institutions, such as churches, NGOs, political parties, and other entities. This question about the university/college frames the specific question about translating scholarship.

Now, I want to shift gears abruptly to say some things about my research on the Catholic clergy sexual abuse crisis as a case study for the problems and possibilities of translating scholarship beyond the classroom and library. I offer it in the spirit of another country heard from, as a contribution to what I hope is a productive comparative conversation.

Back in 2002, when I was at work on the religious history of Catholic childhoods in the US and the second or third round of the story of Catholic clergy sexual abuse broke in the *Boston Globe* (by this time the story nationally was not new), I felt a deep sense of responsibility to contribute what I could, from the perspective of my research, to understanding its roots, causes, and implications. This was an ethical as well as intellectual responsibility. What I discovered immediately was that the major frameworks for understanding the crisis among various stakeholders were criminological, psychological, and legal. All of these focused on individual pathology and corporate legal culpability; they had the effect of taking the crisis out of history and culture. The fact that children and adolescents were often abused in sacristies was said to be an instance of the documented opportunism of pedophiles rather than anything about the kind of space a sacristy is. “History” and “culture” are not many people’s favorite words. Other perspectives claim greater exigency. Church authorities were also emphasizing ahistorical, secular approaches, in defense of their claim that this had nothing to do with modern Catholicism. There was a powerful effort underway to control the terrible reality of sexual violence that had been disclosed by controlling its temporal and spatial coordinates (pedophilia rather than a broader issue of Catholic sexuality;

the decadent American 1960s and 1970s, rather than Catholic modernity, and so on).

So, my contribution became to locate and analyze the specifically Catholic features of the crisis, against such denials. This meant bringing clerical sexual violence into what I saw as its necessary relationship with modern Catholic theology, aesthetics, devotionism, gender, politics, and so on. The confessional was not simply a convenient secret place for sexual transgression; it was a place where sexual transgression took on particular dimensions having to do with Catholic sacramental theology, history, and male privilege. In other words, I was arguing that the crisis was not an exception, but the disclosure of the Catholic normal. I also wanted to attend carefully to victim/survivor stories, specifically their religious histories, to consider the religious consequences of sexual violence at the hands of a priest. My aim was to see how some survivors—those to whom these questions were important—lived with and against their memories, in their bodies and imaginations, the forms of religious practice they improvised over time, their religious work on their worlds, in excess of what was being said about them in other theoretical frameworks.

My overarching aim was to create a kind of historiographical and theoretical two-way traffic: to use the scholarly tools I have developed over time in my work to open the clergy sexual abuse crisis in way that went beyond the constraints of most of the stakeholders involved in the public conversation—church authorities, lawyers, psychologists, activists, apologists—and, at the same time, to use what had been, and continues to be, revealed in the clergy sexual abuse crisis as a lens for reexamining Catholic modernity. The Catholic clergy sexual abuse crisis offers new ways of conceptualizing some perennial issues of Catholic scholarship, about the relationship between the local and the global, for instance, what I have come to understand as the *Catholic local/global inbetween*, a third space through which abusers, documents, victims, excuses all circulated.

But I am not sure that any of this scholarship, or, for instance, this theoretical idea of the local/global inbetween, matters to most of the stakeholders: activists find it too academic; apologists condemn it as anti-Catholic; church authorities, if they are aware of it, probably just want me to go away, as they want the crisis to disappear too, into the domain of the anomalous, the anti-Catholic, the exceptional. Perhaps as a Catholic—a Catholic now *fuori delle mura* (outside the walls), but a Catholic still—I lack the Protestant confidence, born of the legend of Martin Luther's pounding his protests into the church door in Wittenberg, that scholarship, religious scholarship in particular, may have the kind of impact envisioned in the prompt. There's something Weberian about that prompt, combining as it does capitalist

and Christian confidence, like the social gospel movement. Perhaps as a Catholic outside the walls I have a more tragic view of the relationship between scholarship and power.

But all is not despair! I may be outside the walls of the church, but I am inside the walls of the university. The prompt imagines translation moving outward—translating our work to stakeholders outside the university—but I am aiming for the exact opposite in my work on the Catholic clergy sexual abuse. I want to translate the crisis into scholarship, because one this has been accomplished, it may be examined critically, openly, creatively, beyond the stakeholders' horizons. The translations that give me the greatest hope are the appearances of new courses, new scholarly initiatives (such as the one that will begin at this year's AAR), research, seminars, sections of classes on Catholicism devoted to clergy sexual abuse. I am heartened by international conferences, such as the one I attended in Melbourne this past summer, that do comparative analysis across Catholic cultures and between mission fields and metropolitan ecclesiastical centers. All of this explodes the constraints stakeholders have sought to impose on the crisis.

In conclusion, then, I offer this reversal in response to the prompt: *we scholars translate urgent contemporary issues into scholarship*—in the critical, historical, discourses at our disposal, and with our methods—we teach them to successive generations of students, and we write about them in books, articles, blogs, and social media, and in this way we “prove our worth.” This is not to say that the university is a perfect place; of course, it isn't. But to borrow Geertz's famous dictum that because complete asepsis is impossible it does not follow that we just as well might perform surgery in a sewer, just because the contemporary university is at risk from its neoliberal stakeholders, and just because scholars often get thing wrong, or because they—we—can be silly sometimes, does not mean we ought not to continue working to insure the university be a place of sustained, free, focused, and critical inquiry into important matters. That it remains a place of translation.

**Mira Sucharov**  
**Carleton University**

In the tiny corner of the study of Religion that I occupy—Jewish identity and Jewish politics—particularly as pertains to Israel-Palestine, thinking about translating scholarship for broader audiences is no simple matter.

There's the important aspects of *how* to translate scholarship into public fora—and for that I've written a book (*Public Influence: A Guide to Op-Ed Writing and Social Media Engagement*, published by University of Toronto Press) exactly on that topic. In chapters 1-3 I spell out the fundamentals of that, and I will go over some of that today, in my talk.

But in chapters 4 and onwards, I bring up the messy stuff, and I'll discuss that as well today—the pitfalls, particularly when it comes to Diaspora Jewish discourse around Israel.

First, I'll present some best practices on op-ed writing:

1. Scholars need to write simply, for a broad audience; we need to develop a sharp, clear and accessible writing voice. In my book, I provide some samples of academic writing versus op-ed style writing. Avoid jargon; don't deploy assumptions without defending and explaining them; draw the reader in; create a relationship with the reader. Remember that readers will simply stop reading if they're bored.
2. For the op-ed pages, scholars need to think about how to translate their research questions into prescriptive ones. This isn't always easy or natural for academics who have focused on describing, explaining and analyzing. Instead of identifying and addressing only WHY (and WHAT and HOW) questions, op-ed editors are interested in WHAT OUGHT TO BE questions. In other words, WHO SHOULD DO WHAT, AND WHY? Sometimes, I find, scholars are inclined to have their prescription rest on "thinking differently." A scholar might instinctively build an op-ed around the argument that "we (society) need to think differently about an issue." But readers demand a more specific ask. What action—beyond simply thinking—are you demanding of the audience? Recall, too, that the action-audience might be the broad public, or it might be policymakers, members of a particular community, institutional leaders, and so on. Make that clear in your piece. Of course, these prescriptions and even the problems you're identified might be highly contested; this is all the more reason to write about it. Anticipate your critics and respond to them. Marshall the necessary evidence and defend your claims.

3. Scholars in the humanities often write about the past. But editors will require a news peg—why now? Why should the piece be published this week? And what's at stake? Why should we care—and why should we care now? Being an expert on the past can shed important light on the present. Bring that expertise to bear in your piece.
4. While scholars sometimes want to appear to stand at arms-length from their subject or topic, deploying subjectivity and vulnerability can help enrich a piece. In my case, I have used my Jewish identity as a way in to critique my own community around political matters related to Israel-Palestine. This won't work for everyone of course, and *there are other ways*—even if one studies a community which is not a community with which one identifies—to bring the scholarly self into the public discussion.

And now, here are a few best-practices for social media engagement:

1. Recall that you may not persuade your interlocutor, but that others (many others!) are watching and learning.
2. Don't be afraid to pose questions—you can use social media as a lab! You need not have all the answers, even if you see yourself—and others see you—as a self-proclaimed expert.
3. As scholars, we can help clarify debates over terms and concepts and labels; we can help offer definitions that maintain a level playing field. In my book, I discuss terms such as *Zionism*, *Islamophobia*, *rape culture*, *white supremacy*, and how they are understood differently by different people. Another term I don't discuss in my book but is a term relevant for the study of religion in some corners is the term "terrorism." Reckless use of the term has hurt Muslim communities. But there's no need to jettison it all together. Scholars (and here I am drawing on my International Relations background) can help advance the specific meaning of the term terrorism: violence against civilians for political ends—no matter who is conducting that violence. And if that meaning is applied consistently, then marginalized groups may well be protected from discursive harm, and we can still gain traction on researching the phenomenon of violence against civilians.
4. As scholars, we can help cut through what seem to be at least three common types of arguments on social media:
  - a. Is the disagreement one over evidence versus or is it one over interpretation of that evidence?

- b. Is the disagreement over values? Or is the disagreement over how to implement those values?
  - c. talking past one another on an is-ought basis
5. Social capital concerns: the matter of gaining “likes”—and gaining “likes” from the “right” corners—can be energizing but also demoralizing. Start to track the impact of where criticism hurts most in order to illuminate where you stand on issues and who you want to seek out as allies.

I’ll close with some brief reflections of the case of Jewish politics around Israel-Palestine—in the case of the op-ed pages and social media.

First, there’s a whole host of disagreement on basic terms: the occupation, settlements, Zionism, non-Zionism, anti-Zionism. Second, there’s disagreement over whether anti-Zionism is a form of antisemitism. Third, people disagree over whether antisemitism from the LEFT is as relevant as antisemitism from the RIGHT—and even whether antisemitism actually exists on the left, or whether it’s simply weaponized to delegitimize anti-Zionists.

And then there’s the messy, personal stuff: how do we push for justice and signal loyalty to our imagined communities, especially in an age of antisemitism and Islamophobia? How do we go against our family and community messages in some cases?

If you identify as “on the left,” how do you avoid the charge of being either insufficiently tribal or of being considered “Progressive Except for Palestine”? If you identify as on the centre or the right, how do you escape or confront charges of racism/xenophobia/siding with the oppressor, etc.?

Translating scholarship outwardly, broadening the conversation, and bringing a clarifying lens to so many of these difficult debates can be one of the best ways for scholars of religion—and scholars in general—to chip away at echo chambers, reduce polarization, and perhaps help others—and ourselves—seek justice.

### **Religion and Refugees**

*Globally, refugees give evidence of a world in flux—both in the homeland they leave and in the new places they inhabit. In North America, what is religion’s role in the daily lives of refugees? How does it individually and communally aid or complicate their new lives? How is religion used in lobbying governmental policy on refugees? How do refugees stimulate religious vitality? How does religion scholarship shape social attitudes and reactions toward refugees?*

**Melissa Borja**  
**University of Michigan**

I've researched the topic of refugees and religion for the past 17 years—the entirety of my scholarly career. I've dedicated my work to this topic in part because refugee migrations continue to be a matter of great public concern, both here in the United States and around the world. But I also study this topic because I believe that the issue of refugees illuminates some important themes in the study of American religion.

My goal this afternoon is not only to share some of my research findings on the religious dimensions of refugee resettlement, but to make the case that we need to put refugee people—their lives, their experiences, their suffering, their creativity—at the center of our scholarship, because doing so pushes us to consider larger, enduring issues in new ways. Here, I am inspired by Yen Le Espiritu, the critical refugee scholar, who argues in her book *Body Counts* that “critical refugee scholarship conceptualizes the ‘refugee’ as a critical idea but also as a social actor whose life, when traced, illuminates the interconnections of colonization, war, and global social change.”<sup>1</sup>

#### *Tzianeng's Story*

And with that, let me begin by telling you a story about a person I met during my research: a Hmong refugee man named Tzianeng. Tzianeng spent his childhood in a refugee camp in Thailand, until eventually he was sponsored by a Methodist church to resettle in Missouri. He was grateful for his sponsors and for the opportunity to come to the United States. At the same time, though, the sponsorship relationship made him uncomfortable. Tzianeng remembered how his father had requested a tape recorder so that he could record and send tape cassette messages to relatives “to tell them where we are and for them to come and rescue us.” He felt uneasy about how the pastor of his sponsoring congregation brought him to other churches put him on display—“I'm his experiment” to show off, recalled Tzianeng.

And he was forced to go to church. Tzianeng's parents had had negative encounters with Christian missionaries in Laos and in Thailand. “[B]asically, the only memory of church—you know, the mission work—it's very negative,” he said. The family was very strongly animist and felt that sponsorship put them in a coercive situation. “With the churches that sponsored us, we didn't have a choice,” Tzianeng said. “They sponsored us, so we came every Sunday.” Later, he added, “We didn't have a choice. [The pastor would] just come and put us in his car and took us to church.”

Nor did the sponsoring church show respect for his family's animist beliefs. When asked if told his sponsors that he and his family were animist, he replied, “No, because we were never asked.” He continued: “It's typical, I guess. When you are only one family, you already received so much help from them...So, nobody never asked...and even if they did, we would not have understood what they said anyway. Nobody actually sat down and said, ‘We sponsored you, but we still want you to have [your] religion, [the] religious freedom of choosing whether you will remain animist—Hmong animist—or you want to convert to Christianity based on the Methodist philosophy.’”

He ended up converting to Christianity. However, years later, after spending two decades as a member of an evangelical church, Tzianeng regretted his decision to abandon his native Hmong beliefs and practices. This regret intensified when he had a life-changing spiritual experience in Laos, where he visited the Mekong River, the site of the death of many Hmong people during the Secret War. As a result of this experience, when he returned to the United States, he once again changed religions. This time, though, he aimed to follow the way of his Hmong ancestors, and he helped establish a Hmong animist church that honored the beliefs, traditions, and heritage of his family.<sup>2</sup>

There's a lot to consider in Tzianeng's story, but I want to call your attention to three themes that show how focusing on the specific experiences of refugees and migrants offers useful insights into American religious life.

#### *Theme #1: Refugee Care, Religious Institutions, and the Public-Private State*

In refugee relief and resettlement, religious voluntary agencies, charities, and congregations are central to both humanitarian work overseas and social service provision at home. The system of American refugee care reveals the importance of religious institutions in the public-private, Rube-Goldberg contraption that is the American state.<sup>3</sup>

In this system, the U.S. government borrows capacity by contracting with private voluntary agencies, which are central to the formation and implementation of U.S. refugee policy. This public-private approach to refugee relief and resettlement has been in use since the Second World War, and it characterizes American refugee care at the international, national, state, and local levels.

The leading voluntary agencies—in terms of the number of refugees they resettle, but also in terms of their duration of operation and their prominence in advocacy—are religious agencies affiliated with Christian churches.

Even non-religious voluntary agencies can, at the local level, rely on Christian congregations to serve as sponsors.

Importantly, the voluntary agencies and the local congregations with which they partner see the labor of aiding and resettling refugees as religious work that expresses their Christian commitment to welcoming the stranger, living by the Golden Rule, and being peacemakers. This emphasis dovetails with the tendency of Americans to see themselves as rescuers of refugees, when in fact it was the United States' own imperialism and militarism that caused refugees' forced migration in the first place. Thus, narratives of benevolent rescue by American Christians obscure the United States' sins of violence, oppression, and unequal power.

### *Theme #2: The Challenges of Religious Pluralism*

A resettlement system dominated by Christian institutions, informed by Christian assumptions, has also faced challenges in new circumstances of religious diversity. While Christian voluntary agencies and churches are experienced and enthusiastic, their work with refugees has become more complicated because refugee populations over the past five decades have become increasingly non-Christian. These challenges first emerged in the 1970s, the decade that saw the first significant arrival of non-white, non-European, non-Christian refugees: Ugandan Asians and Southeast Asians.

My research indicates that Christian institutions have made sincere efforts to adapt to the new responsibility of serving a religiously diverse population. However, they have not been as "neutral" or as "secular" as they claim to be. Rather than being mere contractors with the federal government—which is how they're often treated—religious voluntary agencies involved in refugee relief and resettlement have seen their work as a religious ministry, and they have often had missionary purposes at the center of their enterprise. You see this if you pay attention to the documents of the congregations and voluntary agencies and, more than anything, you see this if you pay attention to the stories that refugees share themselves.

In the case of Hmong refugee resettlement, Christian voluntary agencies and churches, while well-meaning, were also limited in their ability to respect refugees' religions. Part of the problem was that they didn't know enough about the religious beliefs and practices of the refugees they were resettling. In addition, they were limited by a framework of religious pluralism that forces groups to adhere to a Protestant-centric notion of religion. In order for somebody to respect religious difference, they have to be able to see religion in the first place—and the Hmong did not have a religion that Christian resettlement workers found visible, legible, or recognizable.

If you talk to Hmong refugees, though, you learn quickly that they have beliefs and rituals that they have been intent on preserving. Over time, as they adjusted to an American setting, they began to call these beliefs and practices a religion, and they began to use American laws to protect their ability to practice their traditional rituals. But even before they did so, they found that the American system of resettlement put them in coercive religious situations, as Tzianeng's story shows. They often didn't want to go to church with their sponsors, and they didn't want to become Christian.

Ultimately, Christian people committed to benevolent, pluralistic rescue struggled to enact their own benevolence. In particular, they struggled to make good on their own stated promise to respect refugees' religion and put ideals of pluralism into practice.

### *Theme #3: The Impact of the State on Religious Life*

Policies that on the face appear to be religiously neutral can in fact have a big impact on the religious lives of people. In other words, the state shapes religious life in profound and often surprising ways. In Tzianeng's case, for example, we see that Hmong refugees were profoundly unsettled by resettlement, including religiously unsettled.

How did U.S. refugee policies disrupt the religious lives of Hmong refugees? First, U.S. refugee policies separated families and communities and deprived Hmong people of kin and religious experts. In this way, U.S. policies made the practice of traditional Hmong rituals very difficult, even impossible, because Hmong ceremonies demand so many ritual specialists and family and community members. At the same time that U.S. policies undermined refugees' religious lives, it put refugees in the care of Christian agencies. Thus, US policies provided refugees a new religious option at the same time it deprived them of another.

However, Hmong people like Tzianeng were, like all refugees, creative and resilient, and they adapted to the new circumstances by creating institutions that were legible as religion in the eyes of the state. The state, in the end, encouraged Hmong people to turn their beliefs and practices into a religion.

### *Conclusion*

These are just a few of my findings, but I want to close with some final recommendations about how we think, research, and write about refugees, and about American religion more generally.

We need to put refugees at the center of our work. More broadly, we need to put different people and different stories at the center of our work. Yes, it's useful to research white well-meaning Christians doing humanitarian work in

refugee camps or resettlement work in local congregations. But what is desperately lacking in our field is serious engagement with how Christian benevolence looks like from the perspective of non-white, non-Christian populations that are on the receiving end. Engaging in that perspective will offer a more complicated and a more accurate depiction of faith-based humanitarian work and social service provision. Failure to do so not only means impoverished historical narratives but also the reproduction of unjust and unequal relations of power.

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**Tricia C. Bruce**  
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**E**mbedded in the term “refugee” is the word REFUGE. A safe haven. A place away from danger and despair. Refuge is among the three functions that Charles Hirschman identifies as primary in the ways that immigrants use religion (the other two being as a form of respect, and as a resource).<sup>1</sup> Refugees are immigrants that the U.S. has deemed worthy of refuge—promised safe haven in the United States, apart from fear of persecution on five specific grounds, per the United Nations convention: (1) nationality, (2) race, (3) religion, (4) political opinion, or (5) membership in a particular social group.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the U.S. limits *how much* and *for whom* this refuge is extended. The 1980 Refugee Act introduced a process whereby the President and Congress could set limits around exactly how many refugees could be admitted in the subsequent year. Current refugee admissions to the U.S. are at an all-time low. In 2018, the U.S. admitted just 22,491 refugees, well below the ceiling of 45,000, and lower than the years after 9/11. This year’s (2019) ceiling is itself a record low, at just 30,000. The religious profile of admitted refugees, moreover, is now heavily skewed toward Christians. The last 8-month period saw a refugee population that was nearly 8 in 10 Christian.<sup>3</sup>

To whom do we offer refuge? What does refuge through and in religion look like?

Religion is a context of reception alongside government policies, the labor market, and ethnic communities.<sup>4</sup> Much of my own work studies the *containers* of religion: the structures. The organizations that hold, sort, and organize local religious communities. And as someone whose attention turns especially to the Catholic Church, I observe this process as both top-down and bottom-up. Grassroots initiative is especially strong among new immigrants, who evidence a higher propensity for entrepreneurialism. Applied to religion, this means that immigrants are especially likely to start their own faith communities. A religious “start-up” typically looks like a congregation in the U.S. context, regardless of the shape it takes elsewhere. In the Catholic Church, bottom-up entrepreneurship encounters top-down polity that stipulates what counts as a parish, who belongs, who leads, the relationship to a larger diocese, and more.

The local containers of religion showcase what form “refuge” may take among new among refugees. I wrote a book about a phenomenon in the Catholic Church called “personal parishes.”<sup>5</sup> Similar to the older “national parish” model of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, today’s personal parishes cater to distinctive populations. Usually this means communities of co-ethnics. The most common personal

parishes serve Korean and Vietnamese Catholics. Unlike the more ubiquitous territorial parish designed to serve all in a particular geographic area, personal parishes specialize in serving particular purposes and populations, parishioners’ residential proximity notwithstanding.

Why establish or attend personal parishes? Because they provide refuge. Given the hardship of the migration experience for refugees in particular, being around others who know and understand that experience matters. Refugees may struggle to adjust to where the U.S. government has resettled them, to learn American norms, and to cope with dramatic life transitions. Personal parishes gather and cohere religious adherents navigating similar challenges, bonding them through shared language, custom, and background.

Attuned to this need, religious leaders may work with refugees to create congregations that feel more like home. In a national study of Asian and Pacific Islander American Catholics I led for the U.S. Catholic Bishops,<sup>6</sup> one diocesan leader recounted local efforts on this front:

*When we had the wave of immigration of boat people from Vietnam, the diocese at the time needed to decide, what are we going to do with these Catholics that are coming over? So, that’s when our first [personal] parish was established. It was to meet the needs of those [whose] native language was Vietnamese. They were learning English. They were trying to find their way here in the United States. They had made it through the persecution that was happening to the people in Vietnam. And getting them centered, and [...] finding them a way of life.*

Religion functions as a refuge and way of life...contained under the auspices of local religious leaders.

Personal parishes, like the way that Hirschman speaks of religion’s functions for immigrants overall, can proffer a sense of *respect*. Religious belonging connects to refugees’ normative orientation and self-worth. It helps to forge a new identity out of trauma—a meaning system, and a means to understand the hardship one has endured. Religion offers immigrants a powerful and protected category of identity.<sup>7</sup> This sentiment is reflected in the way one personal parish pastor described to me how his parishioners become “American”: “Somehow we merged into the American society, because we don’t want to be laughed at or stand out as an ethnic group. I think we try to mingle in as much as possible, to become American.”

Personal parishes also provide *resources*. The networks and relationships facilitated through local religious organizations can make a substantial difference to immigrants' modes of incorporation, social adjustment, and economic success. They are particularly good at offering what Robert Putnam calls "bonding capital"—connections to similar others, thus reinforcing one's sense of self and belonging.<sup>8</sup>

Refuge. Respect. Resources. These are among the key functions that link personal parishes, religion, and refugees.

But there's another "R" to add. The very fact that refugees may gather inside religious "containers" filled with others like them—and *not* in territorial parishes, multiracial and shared with other American congregants—signals also the experience of *rejection*. Specialized congregations are spawned by deficiencies in neighborhood parishes. They react against discrimination, a lack of sensitivity, or a wholesale exclusion of alternative practices. Personal parish attendees are akin to "territorial parish refugees," opting out of less-than-welcoming neighborhood parishes. The very request for a personal parish—a place of refuge among similar others—may itself be rejected by local religious leaders. Ethnic communities of Catholics may worship for decades without formal, canonical "parish" status at the behest of the bishop. They instead proceed under names like "faith communities" or "missions" which offer similar ministries but are not the same in form or power.

Any container expels as much as it contains. The language of "push and pull" is familiar in immigration scholarship. One in the US, refugees can be pulled toward Americanized religious identities and organizations as a source of refuge, respect, and resource. But this incorporation may also be characterized by fear, unfamiliarity, and rejection. Refugees may even come to reject religious belonging entirely, as evidenced by declines in affiliation and attendance among the second generation. Or they may reject native, non-English languages as a means of being more fully accepted as "American." First generation migrants recount grave concern that their children will retain neither their language nor their religion as carriers of culture.

As we are pushed and pulled into conversations about religion and refugees, it is worth asking in what ways the containers of religion pull people in, and push people out. How does religion act as resource, refuge, respect—and rejection? Refugees are a people on the move; a people seeking refuge. The containers of U.S. religion may themselves move to offer safe haven, or they may not.

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**Gale L. Kenny**  
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In 2019 the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City displayed a series of photographs along West 110th Street as part of its exhibit, "The Value of Sanctuary." Among them were Cinthya Santos Briones' photograph depicting three children playing in a Manhattan church where they lived in sanctuary for over a year.<sup>1</sup> A few yards down, Christopher Myers's piece superimposed the words "Every Refugee Boat is a Mayflower" over ocean waves.<sup>2</sup> Intended to provoke sympathy from passersby, it also was unintentionally jarring. How have well-intentioned references to seventeenth-century English colonists obscured the violence of settler colonialism and American imperial entanglements that produced the need for Briones's indigenous-appearing children and their mother to take up residence in a church? Taken together, the two images speak to broader questions about the ways religious activists have framed their humanitarian work to aid refugees in the histories we tell about American religion.

In the twentieth century, most U.S. religious institutions have made "welcoming the stranger" a moral imperative. Since at least the 1930s, Christian and Jewish organizations began concerted efforts to resettle and assimilate refugees, although their influence on shaping U.S. policy was tragically limited. After the Second World War, Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant leaders became lobbyists working alongside the Citizens Committee for Displaced Persons as Congress debated a series of proposals for what would become the Displaced Persons Act of 1948.<sup>3</sup>

Amid the legislative debate, the Citizens Committee launched a publicity campaign to rebrand "Displaced Persons" as "Delayed Pilgrims," a term that folded Eastern European strangers into part of the American story. Newspapers ran with the new phrase in editorials and feature articles on refugees for the next decade, and the Citizens Committee produced several radio plays, including one entitled "Plymouth Rock, 1949."<sup>4</sup> As organized Jews, Catholics, and Protestants established voluntary agencies and recruited local activists to do the work of resettlement, they deployed "delayed pilgrim" as well. As a religious practice, refugee resettlement work both affirmed distinct religious communal identities that the war had shattered, and it also demonstrated the trifaith model in which religious institutions contributed to the Cold War liberal consensus that upheld the United States as a city on a hill.

But who was deemed worthy of being a pilgrim? U.S. refugee policy is inextricable from its foreign policy, in spite of measures like the Refugee Act of 1980 that required asylum claims to be considered regardless of the applicant's country of origin.<sup>5</sup> In the '60s, '70s, and '80s, liberals and conservatives alike praised refugee-pilgrims fleeing

America's enemies. From Reagan's speeches to the award-winning children's book, *Molly's Pilgrim*, refugees were turned into a symbol of Cold War geopolitics in which the United States stood as a beacon of religious and political freedom. It was therefore jarring to many U.S. religious leaders when a flood of people fleeing murderous regimes in Guatemala and El Salvador in 1980 were denied asylum and classified instead as "economic migrants."

In the early 1980s, activists in Arizona and Southern California organized the Sanctuary Movement in response. Instead of working from the assumptions of American exceptionalism, activists steeped in liberation theology and the prophetic tradition took a moral stand against the U.S. and its imperial reach that they branded as Babylon.<sup>6</sup> Sympathetic churches around the country took up the Sanctuary Movement as not only an immediate humanitarian response, but as a way to generate a political and moral awakening in their congregations. The Sanctuary Movement was what Winnifred Sullivan calls outlaw religion.<sup>7</sup>

Activists had to bolster the religiousness of sanctuary since there was no basis in law that prevented INS from raiding a church to remove an undocumented individual. Sanctuary activists grounded their movement in the stories of the Underground Railroad and modeled their calls for moral courage after fugitive slaves and radical abolitionists. To these sacred narratives of civil disobedience, Central Americans refugees and clergy added their stories and testimonials of suffering and daunting pilgrim journeys. Testimonials as well as rituals like ecumenical prayer services integrated sanctuary work into participants' religious practice. Their public efforts made it difficult for law enforcement officials to raid a church without a public outcry and moral confrontation. Nonetheless, activists in the first Sanctuary Movement were investigated by federal authorities, and dozens were arrested and charged with providing aid to illegal immigrants. During the ensuing trials, both the Fifth and Ninth Circuit federal courts rejected the activists' defense that the law burdened their free exercise of religion.

While the consensus around "delayed pilgrims" aligned church and state and created a model for faith-based voluntary agencies to work with federal agencies, the Sanctuary Movement and now the New Sanctuary Movement pose a different set of First Amendment questions. The legal framework of religious freedom has changed in the wake of the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), and a handful of legal scholars are now testing a First Amendment defense for Sanctuary activists who defy the law on the basis of conscience.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, such legal arguments attempting to claim

religious freedom for the protection and rights of vulnerable minorities rather than the white Protestant majority align with similar efforts on the part of Native Americans and those who opposed the so-called Muslim Ban. Whether such efforts will succeed in the courts remain to be determined. A study of American refugee policy, its implementation, and the religious lives of refugees and activists not only poses questions of church and state arrangements but joins other scholarship that demands scrutiny of how religion constructs the "American" in American religious studies.

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### **Different Narratives in Religion and American Politics**

*For decades, the popular running narrative of religion and politics has been focused on white evangelicals. It reached its apogee following the 2016 election. But what if we turn our focus elsewhere and explore the role of religion in politics outside that familiar story. Where and how should we focus our attention? What are the trends we're ignoring or missing? What are the other important narratives that have been overshadowed by the dominant focus?*

**Prema Kurien**  
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I will show why it is important not to just focus on 1) white Americans 2) evangelical Christians and 3) elections if we want to understand the role of religion in politics in the United States. I am a sociologist who focuses on immigration and immigrants and the role of religion in shaping migration, transnationalism, and settlement patterns of immigrants and their children. In 2015, according to Pew Research Center data, immigrants and their children comprised 26 percent of the US population. While two-thirds are from Christian backgrounds, their Christianity and their political perspectives may not always align with that of white evangelical Christians. At the same time, my research showed that white evangelicalism is having a profound influence on immigrant Christian groups. My current research focuses on how religion (and race, which I will not have time to address) shape the political mobilization of Indian Americans, who numbered more than 4 million in 2015, and were the second largest immigrant group from one country after Mexico, and one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the US. I am working on a book tentatively titled, *Race, Religion, and Citizenship: Indian American Advocacy Organizations*.

Although Indian Americans have been described as an emerging powerful influence in American politics, their patterns of activism do not follow the model of other powerful American ethnic groups which largely unify around an ethnic identity. Indian Americans have a diversity of advocacy organizations: Indian American, South Asian American, Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Christian, and Dalit, Democratic and Republican, and even combinations such as the Republican Hindu Coalition. These identities matter since they shape goals and strategies in very different ways.

Today, I will focus on how majority versus minority religious status in the United States and in India of Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, and Christian Americans influences their patterns of political activism. According to 2012 Pew Research figures, about half (51 percent) of Indian Americans identify as Hindu, although in India they account for over 80 percent of the population. Christians, on the other hand, constitute only around 2.3 percent of the population in India, but account for around 18 percent of Indian Americans. Muslims and Sikhs form around 10 and 5 percent of Indian Americans respectively. There have been two galvanizing issues that have mobilized Indian American advocacy groups. The rise of Hindu nationalism in India starting from the late 1980s has shaped political activism patterns with respect to foreign policy issues. The infamous 2002 anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat and the role of Narendra Modi (then chief minister of Gujarat and now Prime Minister of India) became a particular rallying event.

The attacks of September 11, 2001 mobilized a variety of groups around domestic policy concerns.

With respect to foreign policy, Hindu American groups on the one hand, and secular Hindus, and Muslim, Christian, and Sikh Indian American groups, on the other, have mobilized in opposing ways around the status of religious minorities in India. Each side cultivates alliances with influential members of Congress and with other American groups whose interests might align with their own. For instance, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) publishes an annual report, which is often critical of India's religious freedoms record. Hindu American organizations have attacked the commission for its Christian bias while Muslim, Sikh, and Christian Indian American groups have supported the commission's censuring of India. Hindu and non-Hindu Indian American groups also mobilized differently around the issue of the violence in Gujarat in 2002. In 2005, Modi was invited to the United States by the Asian American Hotel Owners Association (AAHOA, an organization composed almost entirely of Indian Americans, most from Gujarat) as the chief guest for their annual convention. A variety of secularist Hindu, Muslim, and Christian Indian American groups came together as a "Coalition against Genocide" (CAG) against Modi's visit and urged AAHOA to withdraw their invitation. At the same time an Indian American Christian leader was able to mobilize Christian evangelical support against Modi's visit and get two members of Congress to introduce a resolution in the House criticizing Modi's actions in India which led the State Department to deny Modi a US visa. The Hindu American Foundation protested the resolution calling it "Hinduphobic."

Indian American Muslim and secularist groups were also able to have a resolution introduced in Congress in November 2013, focusing on the 2002 human rights violations in Gujarat, calling for the revoking of anti-conversion laws, which exist in several Indian states, and asking that religious freedom be included in the United States-India Strategic Dialogue. However, through their visits to Congress offices, Hindu American Foundation and USINPAC (an Indian American organization) activists succeeded in preventing the resolution from being considered in the House though the US Congress still went ahead with a hearing on the plight of religious minorities in India in April 2014. The Hindu American Foundation and USINPAC presented a strong defense of the religious rights record of India. The presentations of individuals representing Indian Christians, Muslims, and Sikhs on the other hand, pointed to grave, ongoing human rights violations against Indian religious minorities.

When it comes to US domestic issues, while Indian Christian groups have not been active, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs mobilize around several common issues. These include religious discrimination and racial profiling after 9/11. As a result of the mobilization of Hindu and Sikh groups around hate crimes, the FBI finally agreed in 2013, to expand its hate crime statistics program to include Sikhs and Hindus in addition to Muslims (hate crimes against Muslims have been tracked by the FBI since 1990).

when compared to minority religious groups, which in turn leads to different activism patterns.

Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus have also been challenging the presentation of their religious histories and traditions in US school textbooks. An Indian American Muslim man in California, Shabbir Mansuri, founded the Council on Islamic Education in 1990 to assess the portrayals of Islam in American school textbooks and to recommend changes. In 2011, the Sikh Coalition was able to get the Texas Board of Education to include information about Sikhs and Sikh practices in the state-wide curriculum. Since then, they have achieved similar success in 9 other states. The Hindu American Foundation and other Hindu groups have also mobilized to demand a positive portrayal of Hinduism in school textbooks on parity with those of other religions. They have been involved in such activism in Virginia, Texas, and in a long-drawn-out legal battle against the California State Board of Education (where they were challenged by Indian minority groups).

Sikh and Muslim advocacy organizations have been particularly active in addressing religious accommodation rights. Although turbaned Sikhs had been banned from joining the US armed forces since the 1980s, due to the activism of second-generation Sikh leaders, individual exceptions were made in 2009 for three Sikhs and in January 2017, following a lawsuit under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, regulations were changed to allow for the wearing of beards and turbans by religious individuals. In September 2011, the mayor of New York City signed a Workplace Religious Freedom Act sponsored by Sikh groups, requiring employers to provide religious accommodation for all groups in the workplace unless they can prove that it will impose significant difficulty or expense. In 2012, the governor of California signed a similar bill into law in California.

The activism of organizations representing Indian American groups around both foreign-policy and domestic issues illustrates how religion, and in particular, majority and minority status, can interact with national origin to shape and complicate the political mobilization of immigrants. Dominant religious groups in both the homeland and the countries of settlement have different interests and concerns

**David Harrington Watt**  
**Haverford College**

On September 3, 2017, hundreds of students assembled in the middle of the campus of Haverford College. Some of them were wearing face paint. Many of them were wearing color-coded outfits. From time-to-time nearly all of them chanted slogans. Some of the students yelled “Cite Your Sources!” Others shouted back “Quaker Values!”

The day I witnessed that particular ritual I felt a good deal of confusion and consternation. It is possible, I think, that I now have a somewhat better sense of what the students were doing than I did a couple of years ago. But in the brief remarks I’m going to make today I’m not going to try to interpret the meaning of the ritual. Instead, I am going to ask you to reflect with me on some of the connections between Protestant Christianity, secularism, ethics, and universalism.

Were you to ask someone who worked at Haverford College exactly what it is to which Quaker values refer, they might reply with an acronym: SPICES. According to this account, the Quaker values consist of simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equality, and stewardship. But in point of fact there is no general agreement on what items should appear on the list of Quaker values. When people talk about those values they sometimes have in mind things such as kindness, honor, tolerance, respect of others, global citizenship, service, silent reflection, humility, efficiency, and consensus.

It is possible, in principle at least, to draw on Quaker values to fashion a straightforward critique of U.S. capitalism. You could say that the opposite of stewardship is seeing the natural world as nothing more than a set of resources to be exploited, that the opposite of equality is the unjust distribution of money and influence, that the opposite of community is the glorification of individual egos, and that the opposite of simplicity is showy displays of wealth. And you could then go on to assert that U.S. capitalism produces hyper-individualism, ostentatious displays of wealth, incredible concentrations of money and power, and the wanton destruction of the environment. It is not impossible to imagine circumstances in which socialists and adherents of Quaker values could make common cause.

However, it is also the case that Quaker values are sometimes presented as a foundation upon which a successful for-profit corporation can be built. Consider for instance the Vanguard Group—a set of Pennsylvania investment companies that are currently managing about five trillion dollars in total assets. Vanguard’s founder, John Bogle (1929-2019), maintained that the values upon which

Vanguard was founded strongly resemble “many of the basic Quaker values” championed by William Penn.<sup>1</sup>

Some not-for-profit organizations—the Quaker United Nations Office and the American Friends Service Committee, for example—are also said to be committed to Quaker values. So are a good many well-known educational institutions including Guilford College, Earlham College, Friends Seminary, William Penn Charter School, and Sidwell Friends School.<sup>2</sup>

Some members of the Religious Society of Friends have no trouble whatsoever embracing Quaker values. But many Friends are far less comfortable talking about Quaker values than they are talking about what they refer to as the Quaker Testimonies. And a number of people who are members of the Religious Society of Friends view Quaker values with a good deal of suspicion. As he was strolling across the campus of a college that had been founded by Quakers, a highly-respected Friend told me “you and I both know that Quakers values are just [balderdash].”

It is hard to imagine Margaret Fell, James Naylor, George Fox, or any of the other founders of the Religious Society of Friends taking a strong stand either for or against Quaker values. Quaker values just weren’t an issue with which they had to grapple. They don’t play an important role in the history of the Religious Society of Friends in the seventeenth century. Nor do they figure prominently in the history of Friends in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. Quaker values are a recent invention. Up until the 1940s, people almost never talked about them. Indeed, people didn’t refer to Quaker values with any frequency whatsoever until the 1980s.

My suspicion is that when Quaker values were discussed in the 1980s they were often invoked in conjunction with attempts to deploy and burnish the Quaker brand. That is almost certainly the case right now. Today, for example, leaders of Quakerish educational institutions refer to Quaker values as a way of indicating how their schools are different from other institutions with whom they would seem to have much in common.

And school leaders seem to me to invoke Quaker values in ways that suggest that institutions that embrace Quaker values take ethical concerns more seriously than most schools do. Indeed, Quaker values are sometimes discussed in ways that imply that schools that are Quakerish are more moral than those that are not.

One might think that Quaker values are strongly connected to religion. After all, they are said to be based on the ideals of an organization called of the *Religious Society*



of Friends. But people can talk about Quaker values in ways that seem quite secular. Indeed, some students who take courses on Quakerism at schools where Quaker values are frequently invoked are shocked to learn that Quakerism might be regarded as a religion. (They assume that Quakerism is a philosophy or a set of principles). People who would be mystified by explicitly religious phrases such as “the priesthood of all believers,” “direct experience of the divine,” or “the Christ within” don’t bat an eye when they are told about SPICES.

The values to which SPICES point are said to be rooted in the experience of a very small group of people. (At present that are fewer than half a million Quakers in the world). In that sense, Quaker values would seem to be quite specific. Peculiar even. But Quaker values are also said to point to universal norms that all persons of good will ought to treasure. After all, aren’t we all in favor on honesty, peace, and community? Who could possibly be against things like that? The website of an organization that tries to promote social justice nicely encapsulates the tension between the generality and the specificity of Quaker values. That website explains that the organization’s values are rooted in both “Quaker experience and universal truths.”<sup>3</sup>

I’m not going to conclude by making a set of confident assertions. Instead, I am going to ask a few questions. What, if anything, do invocations of Quaker values accomplish? Do such invocations help institutions carve out market niches? Do they help organizations with whom very few Quakers are associated claim some sort of Quaker identity? Do such invocations provide a modicum of leverage against the excesses of hyper-capitalism?

Do invocations of Quaker Values conjure up a form of Protestantism that is supposed to have freed itself from its religious roots and which now embodies certain universal values to which all human beings ought to give their allegiance? If such conjuring is a part of what such invocations do, then should those of us who hear them be comforted, alarmed, or merely intrigued?

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1. The founders of other successful companies have said similar things.
  2. Quaker values have been embraced by a long list of other organizations. Time constraints prevent us from considering them all.
  3. I’ve heard somewhat similar claims made in other contexts. For example, the defendants in a lawsuit in which I played a very minor role tried to convince the judge that the Protestant version of the Lord’s Prayer is not in any sense a Christian prayer. It is, they said,

simply a convenient summary of universal truths that are accepted by people all over the world.

**Aubrey L. Westfall**  
**Wheaton College**

I'm approaching this session's questions through the lens of my expertise in minority politics within political science. In one line of my work, I'm interested in considering the role religious organizations like churches play in supporting political participation and mobilization across diverse religious communities. For clarity, I define political participation as a broad concept including formal political acts like voting, donating to campaigns but also informal political acts like volunteering or political awareness. Mobilization is an impassioned and typical oppositional form of participation involving protest or activism.

Most of my insights come from my work on the political engagement of Muslims and the role of the mosque in promoting that engagement. Using survey data, I find that mosque attendance and other expressions of Muslim religiosity that require social engagement are correlated with higher rates of voting, party membership, and following politics, while other forms of non-social religious activity were not.

My research on Muslims generally confirmed what we know about the role of religious institutions in promoting political engagement. Most of this work focuses on Catholic and Protestant Christian churches. We understand that churches help to motivate political participation because they help people meet others with different life experiences who can provide perspective, and they can connect people with similar interests and enable them to share political ideas and information. Because the church has historically been a central community umbrella organization under which people of different generations, classes, abilities, backgrounds, and political identities gather, church communities have historically avoided being exclusionary or overly ideological in how they relate to politics, and the main mechanism linking church attendance to political activity is diverse social networks which bring in lots of political information and experience. The effect is not partisan.

However, some of the churches that are most effective at mobilizing people politically are themselves quite homogenous, at least across certain identities, and they are also intensely partisan. These may be the personal parishes Tricia was discussing. For example, research on African-American activism demonstrates that African-American churches, where the congregation is almost entirely black, are very effective at political mobilization, activism, community organizing, and community building. This is often because they are the only or most prominent non-governmental organization in black communities and are the largest organized expression of black community

group interests. But there are other reasons. Research highlights the important leadership role of clergy in the African American church, where black pastors tend to explicitly connect the religious and political with greater frequency than white Christian clergy do.

The relationship between church and politics in black communities is explained by the marginalized social and political position of black communities, which provides political motivation. The overlapping religious and political networks cultivated within the church provide political opportunity. This makes complete sense. The psychological literature tells us that where identities are marginalized, those identities become very politically salient for an individual: People who are discriminated against will want to prevent its occurrence in the future. And where the religious organization provides a ready-made opportunity for mobilization among like-minded peers, the experiences of marginalization can be quickly politicized.

When I logically extend this theory, I guess that in instances where the religious identity is itself the trigger for marginalization, the connection between the marginalized and religious community is even more direct, which should make the link between church and mobilization more intense.

This made me think about Muslims and Jews, who are experiencing marginalization due to a religious identity, which should theoretically enhance the politicization of their communities even more, but I don't think we are seeing the same levels of mobilization, even if we see conventional effects linking religious institutional involvement and less oppositional forms of political participation. What accounts for this difference? Will we see more mobilization with an intensification of marginalization toward these groups?

At the same time, experiences with marginalization do seem to correlate with strong ideological congruence in terms of partisan identity. Like with African-Americans, who politically consolidate on the left side of the ideological spectrum—88% voted Democrat in 2016—a super-majority (66%) of Muslims lean Democrat, and Jews have a longstanding relationship with the Democratic party: 71% of Jews voted democrat in 2016 and 79% in 2018. This suggests that while these groups might not be mobilized through their religious communities to the same degree as African Americans, the mechanism of marginalization is linking their religious and political identities to each other.

Then, because of the prompt for this panel, I started thinking about white evangelicals. As we know, they similarly consolidate on one side of the ideological

spectrum: 81% of white born-again Christians voted for Donald Trump. Once again, this consolidation corresponds with a narrative about marginalization. Researchers at the Public Religion Research Institute asked Americans about their impressions of discrimination in the United States. Overall, people were twice as likely to say Muslims face discrimination as they were to say the same thing about Christians. The only group who did not conform were white evangelical Protestants, who were the only religious group to identify more discrimination against Christians (57-44%). The narrative of victimhood finds its justification in the reality that Christians worldwide are persecuted. But domestically, their victimhood is located in the perceived threat of political correctness and the extension of rights to political minorities. Unlike with the other minority groups I've already discussed, the evangelicals attribute their marginalization to one whole political group—the left—which perhaps accounts for the extremely high levels of ideological consolidation among evangelicals, rivaling that of African Americans.

For all of these groups, the church, mosque, or synagogue has become an effective megaphone for identity politics where the marginalized identity and the religious community overlap. This means that the purest linkages between experiences of group marginalization, religious social networks, and political mobilization will occur in churches that are homogenous along the marginalized identity. Does the homogeneity along certain politically salient shared identities overwhelm the diversity present along other dimensions of identity, like class, generation, or background to compromise the relationship between church membership and political participation that we see in the literature?

Perhaps the religious institutions can make up for a loss of diversity within their congregations by engaging in social network formation through cross-cutting political collaboration across religious groups based on issue or ideological position, like what we have seen with Jews and Muslims, or even across groups with fundamentally different values aside from anti-discrimination, like we have seen with Muslims and LGBTQ+ activists. In this case, issue or political ideology becomes the umbrella under which diverse people gather instead of the church. The digital age certainly provides ample opportunity for these forms of collaboration. What other collaborations involving religious communities will emerge? How central is a shared experience of marginalization or threat to making these coalitions work? What possibilities are there on the right side of the ideological spectrum?

Answering the questions assumes that religious institutions will persist and retain their importance as centers of community life. Certain trends contradict this assumption. There is a growing group of religious “nones,” those who do not affiliate themselves with institutional religion and hence

do not tend to attend religious services, but nonetheless define themselves as religious. In the U.S., the percentage of people with no religious affiliation has been on the rise, but these same people tend to hold conventional religious beliefs. In Europe, various forms of being neither very religious nor specifically nonreligious have been identified, and in most countries these individuals comprise half of the population. These trends reveal changing religious lifestyles and behaviors, at least in industrialized democracies, a change that may have dramatic implications for the way mechanisms linking religion and politics function. How will these non-affiliates change the way we think about religious organization and mobilization? What new connections will they forge between their religious belief systems and their politics, and what institutions will facilitate these connections?

There is a lot of work for us to do!

### **Religion and Crisis**

*Religion can play multiple roles in crises but almost always it is deeply embedded in the social, economic, scientific, cultural, or political circumstances of the day. From violence to peacemaking, from voter suppression to Moral Mondays, from homophobia to human rights, from climate change denials to faithful environmentalism, contemporary American life is rife with pressing contradictions. How can we best understand religion's relationship to crisis, past and present? Rather than focus on only one side of the equation—religion as the problem or the answer, the cause or the solution—how might we form more holistic understandings of how religion is embedded in crises?*

**Amanda J. Baugh**  
**California State University, Northridge**

A 2018 special report issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warns that the impacts of climate change are even more severe, and happening even more quickly, than scientists previously predicted.<sup>1</sup> While the 2015 Paris accords set the goal of limiting warming to two degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels (and we're nowhere near on track to meet that goal), the IPCC report warns that the effects of only 1.5 degrees of warming can result in "a strong risk of crisis" as early as 2040.<sup>2</sup> The report paints a world of impending doom within the very near future, with worsening food shortages and droughts; mass species extinction; more frequent and deadlier heat waves, hurricanes, and mudslides; and most alarming in my home state of California, worsening destruction from wildfires. In his remarks surrounding the release of the report, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called climate change "the defining issue of our time" as he declared, "Dear friends, let there be no doubt about the urgency of the crisis."<sup>3</sup>

In this session I want to consider the role of religion in this crisis. Moving beyond simplistic constructions of religion as the problem or solution, I offer a more holistic explanation. There is a significant body of scholarship that examines the intersections of religion and the environment, including two journals, numerous articles, and many books. But I'd suggest that the scholarship offers a very limited understanding of religion's role in the climate crisis, or the environmental crisis more broadly, because conversations have been framed by a much narrower question of how religion advances or undermines the project of *environmentalism*. For example, the prompt for this session asks me to interrogate the binary of climate change denial or faithful environmentalism. The terms of this equation are inadequate.

The problem is that environmentalism is a distinct political and social movement—dominated by politically progressive white people—that offers a particular (intellectual/modern scientific/rational/political/activist) way of responding to the environmental crisis. Evan Berry and Mark Stoll offer excellent histories of that movement, and the ways it's indebted to white, Protestant thought.<sup>4</sup> If we are asking about the role of religion in this particular movement, then we are asking, essentially, *How and to what extent are diverse communities embracing a white, middle-class, Protestant way of responding to the environmental crisis?*

Scholarship on religion and the environment has focused primarily on the cultural expressions of politically progressive, white environmentalists who view nature through an Enlightenment framework, or conversely, the

way religion prevents people from viewing nature that way. To the extent that people of color are acknowledged, it is almost always in the context of environmental justice. This results in a dichotomy where white environmentalists can actively love and care for the earth while people of color can express concern only as victims of environmental problems. This association of white people with normative environmentalism is prevalent among both scholars and the broader public.<sup>5</sup> For example, when I began conducting ethnographic research on environmental values among churchgoing Latinx Catholics in Los Angeles, several priests advised me to adjust my project because, they told me, Latinos cared about immigration and the struggles of daily life, not the environment.

Yet my conversations with Latinx Catholics have revealed a widespread sense of love and respect for the natural world.<sup>6</sup> Take, for example, some of the statements I heard in focus groups conversations.

"From the moment we believe in God and in all his creation, we are already aware of nature, and the connection humans have with nature. From the simple fact of being Catholic and believing in God and in the Bible, we are 100% conscious of nature and the environment."

"God created everything and we have to love it...All creation is made by God and we must love plants like a brother." Not protecting the environment "is the same as looking at a brother in the street not helping him."

These statements are expressions of what I'm calling nepantla environmentalism, an ethic of living lightly on the earth that is grounded in a sacramental, relational worldview in which God is present in the material and the human-nature boundary is porous. Nepantla is a Nahuatl term that connotes a position of being in the middle, or center, of two or more things. Scholars have used the concept to analyze the complex interplay of Catholic and indigenous outlooks among Latinx communities.<sup>7</sup> I build on their work as I employ nepantla to describe an ecological outlook that combines aspects of Catholicism, indigenous cosmologies of Latin America, and global environmental thought.

Nepantla environmentalism is expressed through home-based conservation measures, such as reusing old yogurt containers instead of purchasing Tupperware, boiling pasta in the same water that was used to rinse out the jar of sauce, and wearing hand-me-down clothing that was donated

to the church. Many of the Latinx Catholics I've met are avid backyard gardeners and feel an especially close connection with trees. Across sites I heard variations of a teaching that if you cut one tree you must plant ten more. One first-generation Mexican-American in his twenties, told me, "if you're Latino and you don't have a fruit tree at your house, it's like, you're not really Latino."

To be clear, I am not suggesting that nepantla environmentalism offers the key to solving the climate crisis. For all of the ecofriendly values and practices I have described, my informants also undertook practices with negative ecological consequences, such as purchasing cheap clothing or consuming bottled water. I also do not suggest that nepantla environmentalism is a monolithic outlook shared by all Latinx Catholics in the United States, or that nepantla environmental expressions are unique to Latinx Catholic communities. Conserving resources, planting trees, and avoiding consumerism are behaviors familiar to many others, including other working-class and immigrant communities, as well as concerted environmental activists.

What I *am* arguing is that nepantla environmental practices and values align with efforts to mitigate climate change, yet they are seldom recognized as responses to the climate crisis because they are assumed to be expressions of culture or poverty, not concern for the environment. In this sense, religion plays a significant role in the climate crisis because it helps define the terms of the problem, and the solution. By restricting environmentalism to the particular vision that follows from the movement's white, Protestant foundations, religion prevents both scholars and activists from seeing the wide range of possibilities for responding to the crisis.

The IPCC report calls for a radical, global change, and many of the leading activists fighting for those changes have emerged from the white Protestant American environmental lineage found in our scholarship. But if we want to understand more broadly the complex ways that religion plays a role in the climate crisis, surely we must look beyond the narrow scope of white intellectuals. Just as religion can serve as the basis for building environmental coalitions, it can also serve as a barrier, by limiting our ability to identify environmental actors and practices that do not necessarily align with our own assumptions about what environmentalism is. The urgency of the climate crisis demands that we break down that barrier, and recognize the array of possibilities that become evident when we move beyond the limited framework of climate change denial or faithful environmentalism.

I.P.C.C. Special Report on the Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5 Degree Celcius above Pre-Industrial Levels," (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2018). <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>.

2. Coral Davenport, "Major Climate Report Describes a Strong Risk of Crisis as Early as 2040," *New York Times* Oct 7, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/07/climate/ipcc-climate-report-2040.html>.
3. António Guterres, "Secretary-General's remarks on Climate Change" (Address given at the 2018 Climate Change Summit, New York, NY, September, 10, 2018.) <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2018-09-10/secretary-generals-remarks-climate-change-delivered>.
4. Evan Berry, *Devoted to Nature: The Religious Roots of American Environmentalism* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015); Mark Stoll, *Inherit the Holy Mountain: Religion and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Oxford ; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015).
5. See, for example, Dorceta E. Taylor, "The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations: Mainstream Ngos, Foundations, Government Agencies," (Green 2.0, 2014).
6. My conversation partners are mostly Mexican-Americans, but also include Central Americans and Puerto Ricans. While some are immigrants and first-generation Americans, others come from families who have lived in California for generations. My conversations have taken place mostly in English, with two focus groups and a few interviews conducted in Spanish.
7. Lara Medina, "Nepantla Spirituality: Negotiating Multiple Religious Identities among U.S. Latinas," in *Rethinking Latino(a) Religion and Identity*, ed. Miguel A. De la Torre and Gastón Espinosa (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006); Rudy V. Busto, "The Predicament of Neplanta," in *New Horizons in Hispanic/Latino(a) Theology*, ed. Benjamín Valentín (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003).

**John Corrigan**  
**Florida State University**

I want to begin by offering a thought about amnesia and religion and eventually get to what that has to do with crisis. Most of the time we tend to think about religion as a machinery of memory, as a tradition of conserving tradition. The twentieth century historian of religion Mircea Eliade, who, like Freud, is not read much anymore but whose ideas, like Freud's, loom *sub rosa* in much of our discussion about religion and culture—Eliade believed that the cardinal sin, after all was said and done, was to forget. For Eliade religion was the “eternal return,” the chronic remembrance and celebration of things as they always had been; a continuous reencountering of ontological essences as they had been forged by the gods *in illo tempore*.

In fact, religion is an appliance that enables forgetting as much as remembering. To put a finer point on it, religion not only licenses forgetting, it hypes it. It can persuade a person to forget that people are dead when they are six feet in the ground, offering instead a reverie of the dead as present and in contact with the living. It can persuade that unreal things—angels, devils, souls, human saints in heaven, a talking animal, a flying monk, an invisible deity sitting at the dinner table—are real and it does so by fostering amnesia. Religion coaxes forgetting. Eliade was right in theorizing religion as a technology of memory. But enmeshed with that is religion's constitutive other: to induce adherents to forget what they know. To forget, that is, that people do not rise from the dead, that animals do not talk, that people cannot fly. Religion is the art of forgetting, and that artistry comes in handy during a crisis.

Some crises are rhetorical constructions. Religious Americans since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in an unbroken line of warnings and prophecies, have made crisis the centerpiece of their thinking about the world. From Anglo-American jeremiads predicting God's coming judgment, to Millerites, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the pronouncements of Catholic and Protestant media celebrities, Americans of Christian backgrounds continuously have warned of national crisis in the form of a judgment on the nation and on the world. In recent decades, the Religious Right has made crisis its brand. The Muslim crisis. The abortion crisis. The gay marriage crisis. The Christian persecution crisis. The border crisis.

Such inventions serve an assortment of purposes in the historical moments of their contrivance. But there are other crises that are less massaged. Native American genocide. Slavery. War. Environmental catastrophes such as hurricanes, floods, and fires. Economic collapse. AIDS. Such crises are not invented.

American Christian response to crisis typically is manifested as an impulse to return to faithful practice, to recover something that has been lost, to remember that God made the nation for His plan. Recuperating a trajectory toward that plan—a returning to the pathway leading to the national destiny—means recommitting to the theological standpoints that define that vision: America is a Christian nation, singularly blessed by God, an exception. Early New England clergy, out of despair that colonists had drifted from orthodoxy, called, in jeremiads for a return to tradition. So also did the leaders of the Westboro Baptist Church, fearing that God was forsaking America—and punishing it with war and disease—because of the national failure to discipline gays. In both cases, and with many in the intervening years, the point was to remember what America was and to reembrace that truth.

The other, interrelated, religious response to crisis is the cultivation of forgetting. In narrative rehearsals of the great Christian plan of American destiny, there is little handwringing about the sin of slavery, about Native American genocide, about the long history of religious violence in America. Religion collaborates—sometimes as a blind partner, but a collaborator nonetheless—in a systematic and ongoing project of fostering the forgetting of crisis. The 19<sup>th</sup> century French historian of religion Ernst Renan's well-known dictum that “the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things”<sup>1</sup> foretells the enactment of religious fantasies about America.

If we concede that some crises are beyond control—that is, they are not rhetorically manufactured in a way that allows for the manipulation of effects; rather, they are real events involving suffering and death—we can see those crises as material anomalies incomprehensible within the architecture of religious life (except perhaps through the distorting lenses of theodicy). They do not fit the scheme, and must be forgotten. And if people can forget that corpses in graves are really dead, they can forget much else.

So, how does religion enable forgetting of crisis?

Consider for example, the Great Dying. Historians and geographers from University College in London two months ago estimated that the 56 million deaths of Native Americans between European arrival and 1600 so tragically depopulated the Americas (in total by as much as 80-90%) that it reduced carbon dioxide in Earth's atmosphere to the point of causing climate change.<sup>2</sup> Much of that population decline was due to disease, but much nevertheless was because of warfare. The Europeans who settled what became the United States were complicit in that genocide, but even

in the seventeenth century, in the wake of the slaughter of King Philip's War and others, Americans already were busy forgetting the crisis. They promoted that forgetting through frequent reference to the Old Testament story of the Amalekites, wherein God ordered the genocide of the Amalekites (the enemies of the Jews) and added that once the Jews had exterminated them, they should forget them. From John Winthrop and Cotton Mather to Charles Finney and Alexander Campbell, and continuing up through a wide range of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century writings, American writers responding to the scattered calls for honest appraisals of the Indian genocide cited the command of Deuteronomy 25 to "blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven."

Violence against Catholics and Mormons, in crises named "the Mormon Wars" and "the Bible Wars," likewise abundantly referenced Deuteronomy, but they implemented that forgetting through a process with a few more moving parts. The cultivated amnesia of Americans with regard to violence against those two religious groups—among many others—often was realized through an imagined spatial displacement of those groups to other territories—to territories that were not part of the United States. Utah, which was the primary Mormon site for most Americans, was over time progressively and specifically characterized as a place that was as other as Asia. Catholic communities were projected into a similar foreign realm identified as "Rome," a nebulous, shadowy religious field of Europe, with pop-up manifestations elsewhere. In both cases the principle was: "Out of sight, out of mind." Violence against such groups could not be recognized as American violence if in fact those groups were "someplace else." And so the process of forgetting was made both silkier and more efficient.

Which brings me in closing to a current example of amnesia abetted by religion: gun massacres. The well-known response of religious, pro-gun people is to offer "thoughts and prayers"—and to promptly forget the tragedy. The usage of the phrase, which the *Washington Post* last month correlated strongly with white evangelicals after analyzing 600,000 tweets, bespeaks a forgetting behavior that is entwined with a broader cultural habit of religiously-directed amnesia about other tragedies—such as Native American genocide, slavery, and so forth. While not all who choose not to remember school shootings can be said to be religious, the behavior as a whole is grounded in a well-practiced penchant for forgetting that has been defined over four centuries by appeals to religious ideas and habits. It is part of a pattern. It may be that a recurring site for such shootings—houses of worship—has something to do with that pattern.<sup>4</sup> But as for crisis, there is little that happens in the United States in recent years that commands more news coverage than the crisis of mass shootings, and it is clear that religion is operationalized as a means by which to move quickly past such crises, filtering them from memory while papering over the stain with prayers.<sup>5</sup>

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1. *L'essence d'une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup de choses en commun, et aussi que tous aient oublié bien des choses.*" Ernest Renan, "Qu' est-ce qu'une nation?" in *Oeuvres Complètes, vol. 1 of 10 vols.*, (Paris: Calmann Lévy: 1947-1961), 892.
  2. Alexander Koch, Chris Brierley, Mark M. Maslin, and Simon L. Lewis, "Earth System Impacts of the European Arrival and Great Dying in the Americas after 1492" *Quaternary Science Reviews* 207 (March 2019), 13-36.
  3. John D. Harden and Marisa Lati, "How President Obama Politicized the Use of 'Thoughts and Prayers' after Mass Shootings" *Washington Post*, April 20, 2019 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/how-president-obama-politicized-thoughts-and-prayers-after-mass-shootings/2019/04/19/2895d7b6-5d5c-11e9-a00e-050dc7b82693\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.1fb6e52a94fe](https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/how-president-obama-politicized-thoughts-and-prayers-after-mass-shootings/2019/04/19/2895d7b6-5d5c-11e9-a00e-050dc7b82693_story.html?utm_term=.1fb6e52a94fe). Accessed May 22, 2019.
  4. A piece of that pattern is the fact that so many mass shootings are in houses of worship. In recent years, we have seen that is Pittsburgh, Charleston, Sutherland Springs (Texas), and Oak Creek (Wisconsin).
  5. For recent discussion of amnesia about mass shootings see Emily Badger and Kevin Schaul, "How Soon We Forget Mass Shootings," *Washington Post*, October 3, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/10/03/the-short-american-memory-how-mass-shootings-vanish-almost-instantly/?utm\\_term=.ccc91176daef](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/10/03/the-short-american-memory-how-mass-shootings-vanish-almost-instantly/?utm_term=.ccc91176daef), accessed May 22, 2019; Terry Plumb, "Commentary: Our National Amnesia with Gun Massacres," *The Rock Hill Herald*, December 28, 2012, <https://www.mcclatchydc.com/opinion/article24742171.html>, accessed May 22, 2019; Maria Esther Hammack, "A Brief History of Mass Shootings," *Behind the Tower*, 2016, <http://behindthetower.org/a-brief-history-of-mass-shootings>, accessed May 22, 2019; Josh Sanburn, "Why the FBI Report That Mass Shootings Are Up Can Be Misleading," *Time* September 26, 2014, <http://time.com/3432950/fbi-mass-shooting-report-misleading/>, accessed May 22, 2019; Adam Gopnik, "Thinking About Guns, Five Years After Newtown," *The New Yorker*, December 14, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/thinking-about-guns-five-years-after-newtown>, accessed May 22, 2019.



**Anthony Petro**  
**Boston University**

Crisis is an interesting keyword for thinking about religion in the U.S. Despite having written a book on religion and the HIV/AIDS *crisis*, I think the “crisis” part of my work remains under-thought—perhaps crisis remains under-thought in our field more generally.

To be sure, we are all fluent in the language of crises. As the abstract of this panel notes, crises range from violence and peacemaking to homophobia and human rights, from voter suppression to climate change, from the “border crisis” to the crisis that is the current presidency. Crisis is not only our history and everyday experience but also the way we, as scholars, often narrate the history of U.S. religion. Consider, for instance, Perry Miller’s account of Calvinist declension or Ann Douglas’ fierce critique of the feminization of American culture; Jackson Lears’ history of the crisis of authority that fueled the anti-modernists or Molly Worthen’s analysis of the crisis of authority at the heart of evangelicalism.<sup>1</sup> (That all of these texts focus on white Protestants is not incidental).

Let me get to a point, my first of three: we use the language of crisis to name specific kinds of events, events we live or that others have lived, *and* we use the language of crisis to narrate these events, to mark them as historical events. I’m interested in this rhetorical use of crisis, in crisis language. Anthropologist Janet Roitman helpfully defines crisis as “an observation that produces meaning.”<sup>2</sup> She examines the work that crisis rhetoric does: “Crisis comes to signify the marking out of ‘new time’ insofar as it denotes a unique [...] transition phase.” “Crisis,” she continues, “marks history and crisis generates history.”<sup>3</sup>

We might think of this a little differently by asking: *how does the language of crisis make us feel?* Crises are unsettling; they demand response, impose urgency. They claim that something—usually a specific thing—has gone wrong. They mark a transition from one way of seeing things, one way of narrating history, toward another. Crisis opens the possibility of the new, of something better—or worse. It is the jeremiad, the destruction of Sodom, and the revelation. (This religious language is not incidental.)

Considered this way, crisis is, we can see, a narrative term, a theatrical concept, a tension that builds a good story or history. We cannot fully separate its rhetorical usefulness, seen in how we narrate events, from its cognitive and embodied effects on how we live or how we think about events, how we mark them out, how we understand historical time.

I hope it is clear that, to consider the rhetoric of crisis, is not to say that crises are not “real.” But if it

nonetheless feels transgressive to analyze crisis this way, like a break with the imperative for crisis to take over how and what we think, then that only makes it all the more important to consider the work that crisis talk does. Crisis rhetoric is a focusing lens, one that rushes us toward change.

Here is my second point: there is a contradiction embedded in the language of crisis. We might think of crisis rhetoric as one type of what Eve Sedgwick calls “paranoid reading,” a type that she contrasts to “reparative readings.” Paranoid readings offer strong, encapsulating theories; they explain it all; they work through exposure; and, Sedgwick suggests, they often have the “unintentionally stultifying effect” of making it harder to understand what is happening. They tend to tell us what we already know.<sup>4</sup>

Take, for instance, public reaction to the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report regarding clergy sexual abuse—as religious studies scholar Kent Brintnall has noted, many people appeared shocked by this report, as if the crisis of Catholic sexual abuse were not something we already knew a great deal about (and have for some time). How do we work past the paranoid exposure of crisis talk toward other kinds of analysis, other kinds of knowledge?

This is the potential contradiction—if, as Roitman notes, crisis rhetoric works by producing meaning, by generating rupture and leading ostensibly to something ‘new,’ it also, as a paranoid rhetoric, often winds up telling us again what we already know. That’s the tension in crisis rhetoric: that the new meaning it produces is often less new than it claims. Its claims to innovation mask its operation. This is the crisis at the center of crisis talk.

I want to suggest a third point: I doubt very much, given the affective and market purchase of crisis rhetoric, that any of us can or will give it up anytime soon. But I want to suggest we consider it alongside one alternative to crisis, which is the “chronic.” Elizabeth Freeman helpfully elaborates what she calls the queer chronic: “chronicity,” she writes, “correlates with a certain shapelessness in time, and chronic conditions seem to belie narrative altogether. The chronic foils difference between not only beginnings and ends but also transgression and the reproduction of the status quo [...]” “Chronic conditions.” She explains, “are simply time-ish.”<sup>5</sup>

Crisis rhetoric generates historical events, it figures our narratives; the chronic moves away from this narrative of time, perhaps away from narrativity itself, as Freeman suggests, to the extent that it dwells in a middle space, this time-ish place, where things just keep going on and on.

So, here's my question: What would it look like to privilege of the rhetoric of the chronic in the ways we tell the history of U.S. religion? Or perhaps to put this another way: can we narrate crises without resorting to the controlling rhetoric of crisis?

Let me close with one possibility from the archives of religion and the AIDS crisis in the U.S., one that turns to the visual archive of crisis. Artist and activist David Wojnarowicz, who would die from AIDS in the early 1990s, became one of its most important critics and prophets. A prolific writer, Wojnarowicz nonetheless found words, found language itself, to be limiting—too close to what he called “the preinvented world,” which he understood as the narrative tropes into which everything must fit.<sup>6</sup> At these moments, he turned to art, both to catalogue and to reinvent.

Something of a queer Emerson, Wojnarowicz often drew upon nature, including animals and insects, as metaphors worked into pieces that take the form of myth. His 1987 painting *The Death of American Spirituality* offers one example of such work particularly rich for thinking about crisis, the chronic, and American religion.<sup>7</sup> Wojnarowicz used highly charged symbols—a crucifix with ants, the head of Jesus, clocks, trains, machines, images of sex, maps, newspapers, kachina dolls, money or coins—he used these symbols both to criticize the world around him and to conjure an alternative world. Not always, but sometimes, he used the word *spirituality* to describe these alternative visions. Sometimes that spirituality was in decline. Sometimes not.

What I find appealing about his work is that it both is and isn't about the AIDS crisis. To be sure, the virus that causes AIDS would wreak havoc in his world, in our world. But the crisis, in his work, isn't merely viral. It's also spiritual, racial, sexual, moral, classed, located. The virus did not create this crisis but exacerbated longstanding, *chronic* conditions of homophobia, racism, and poverty. For Wojnarowicz, religion, or what he sometimes called spirituality, both caused but also could help end these conditions. His visual archive of crisis is haunted by the chronic, by what he calls the death of American spirituality. It's a crisis long in the making.

2. Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 41.
3. *Ibid.*, 19; 20.
4. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-152; quotation from 124.
5. Elizabeth Freeman, “Hopeless Cases: Queer Chronicities and Gertrude Stein's ‘Melanctha,’” *Journal of Homosexuality* (63:3, 2016), 336.
6. See David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York: Vintage, 1991).
7. The image is visible here: <https://hammer.ucla.edu/take-it-or-leave-it/art/the-death-of-american-spirituality/>.

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1. Ann Braude's reassessment of the declension and feminization narratives in American religion through a focus on the presence of women suggests one model for thinking about what we might call “the chronic,” which I discuss later in this piece. See Ann Braude, “Women's History Is American Religious History,” in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 87–107.

### **New Religious Movements Embodied**

*Recent work on such subjects as photography, race, and gender have furthered our understandings of the role of the body in religious history. How were conceptions of the body of those who were shaped by new religious movements similar to or different from these? How might more attention to the body in the study of new religious movements complicate our conceptions of race and gender in American religions?*

**Andre E. Johnson**  
**University of Memphis**

I, along with my co-author, Amanda Nell Edgar, in our book *The Struggle Over Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter*, wrote about the work of Leah Gunning Francis. Her book, *Ferguson and Faith*, became the first book to chronicle the role of faith in the early days of the Ferguson resistance. Gunning Francis argued that many of the BLM activists and protesters in the streets of Ferguson “demonstrated a very particular kind of embodiment of scripture and faith” and that activists “sought meaning through scripture in connection with their work for justice.” Gunning Francis offered an example of this in the testimony of Alexis Templeton. When speaking on the faith and spirituality of the protesters she met and marched within the streets of Ferguson, Templeton noticed that protesters’ spirituality seemed “fluid.” She remarked, “when you’re fluid in the Word, you live better because you’re not constantly looking for the literal meaning in these scriptures. You are moving. You’re just letting the Word push you. You’re letting it come out of you. That’s what you supposed to do.” It was the activists’ responses and performances of faith that led Templeton to an epiphany in the streets of Ferguson. She confessed, “They taught me to believe in God, and that’s real.”<sup>1</sup>

We wanted to highlight this in our work because people do not discuss BLM as a spiritual or faith-inspired movement. However, when we began to trace the role of spirituality in the BLM movement, we discovered that one of the founders of BLM, Patrice Khan-Cullors, identified the role of the spirit as necessary in this line of work. Her understanding of spirituality and faith demonstrates that, for her, “faith is not a barrier to activism, but a bridge to understanding the role of justice beyond the individual experience.”<sup>2</sup>

In our book, when we interviewed BLM activists, we discovered that the role of spirituality undergirded participant’s understandings of their activism. We mentioned Andrew Wilkes’ notion of a Pentecostal Piety—referring to the role of the Holy Spirit in political action, that help shape activists understanding of the role of spirit in their activism. We wrote that “despite the potential implications of the term, Wilkes’ concept does not centralize any particular Christian denomination or any specific religious tradition. Instead, he offers the concept as one that crosses denominational, religious, faith, and moral lines based on the precedent of inter-faith justice work.”<sup>3</sup>

It is this understanding of “spirit” that leads many activists to practice what Larycia Hawkins calls “embodied solidarity.” For Hawkins, embodied solidarity means to “suffer with.” However, she is quick to add that “suffering with includes our entire bodies,” and she reminds us that

“solidarity from a distance is not solidarity. Theoretical solidarity is not solidarity at all.”<sup>4</sup> She calls for a paradigm shift in our thinking that will allow us to see that all humans matter, and we do this by being with those unseen or rejected humans. After hearing her speak about embodied solidarity, writers for the Parliament of World Religions defined the concept this way:

When we embody solidarity—when we literally stand with one another with our bodies—we experience one another’s suffering. This action stretches beyond empathy (a very necessary component) and into the realm of sacrifice. We chain ourselves to one another; we stand between our neighbors and their oppressors and utter the proverbial “if you want to hurt them, you gotta go through me first,” with full expectation that our ultimatum will be accepted and that we will be hurt.<sup>5</sup>

If any of this sounds familiar, especially if you are a person of faith from the Christian tradition, it should. Embodied Solidarity has many of the same elements of incarnation—the faith belief that God divested God-self and dwelled in human form in the person named Jesus. However, while many Christians affirm by faith the doctrine of Incarnation, many Christians do not see the radical intentionally associated with the belief. In something I call the *Intentionality of Incarnation*, I argue that the context and condition that God/Jesus decided to dwell with humankind matters. In short, who Jesus surrounded himself with, places Jesus chose to go, who Jesus talked to and yes, even how Jesus died are relevant to Christians in understanding who God is and how God functions.

If we take the incarnation and its association with Hawkins’s view of embodied solidarity seriously, then the body takes center stage. Though started as a hashtag (#BlackLivesMatter) after the murder of Trayvon Martin, the social media phenomenon took to the streets and quickly became a movement of protest. However, that protest, as we and others discovered, found itself rooted in a spirituality of “empathy, loving engagement, intergenerational participation, and support for Black families and Black “villages” of collective care.” BLM activists have constructed “altars to honor the dead at protest sites, and activists read the names of the dead as a sacred act of remembrance.” They also “host events focused on emotional health and spiritual well-being.”<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, despite being born as an overt secular movement, BLM is not void of spirituality or faith commitments. Even though in their protest activism, they will practice an embodied solidarity and tenants of an incarnational ministry, but this spirituality is in many ways

not orthodox to many mainstream religious traditions—especially Christianity. However, what one cannot dispute is that through their bodied witness, a spirituality that moves from moral suasion to bearing witness, activists are discovering new and transformative ways to handle issues, problems, and concerns that Black people face daily. As a liberative and prophetic movement, BLM activists have drawn of the Black liberationists movements of the past and discerned the contextual realities confronting them today. In so doing, they have discovered a spirituality that works for and speaks to them.

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1. Amanda Nell Edgar and Andre E. Johnson. *The Struggle Over Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2018, 47.
2. Edgar and Johnson. *The Struggle Over Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter*, 50.
3. Edgar and Johnson. *The Struggle Over Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter*, 51.
4. Larycia Hawkins. *The Gospel and the Meaning of Embodied Solidarity*. TEDxWilmington. June 29, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qn3lsZhWGy8>.
5. “Embodied Solidarity” Offers Faith-Based Alternative to Divisive Political Rhetoric at Parliament Event. Parliament of the World’s Religions. June 5, 2016. <https://parliamentofreligions.org/blog/2016-08-04-1622/%E2%80%9Cembodied-solidarity%E2%80%9D-offers-faith-based-alternative-divisive-political>.
6. Elise M. Edwards. “Let’s Imagine Something Different”: Spiritual Principles in Contemporary African American Justice Movements and Their Implications for the Built Environment. *Religions*, 8 No 12, 256, 4.

**Leonard Norman Primiano**  
**Cabrini University**

For this session on “New Religious Movements Embodied,” I want to address how photography, race, and gender interacted in the history of Father Divine’s Peace Mission. To prompt reflection, I would like to focus on a powerful contemporary example of photography, the body, and the Peace Mission which involves the remnant of this religious community’s membership. To this end, I ask you to turn to a *New York Times* “Lens” photo essay titled: “[Philadelphia, City of Father Divine](#),” an article and most importantly a slide show of 15 photographs.

Let us consider these contemporary photographs of members of the Peace Mission taken by a non-member who sought out the aging and—might I add—rather innocent followers within this intentional celibate utopian communitarian American religion. The photographs are beautifully composed, focused and clearly articulated. The photographer is a recent M.F.A. graduate in Experimental and Documentary Arts at a major American university. I am not naming her in my comments here because I do not feel that she deserves any further recognition for this work.

These photographs, as you can see, have appeared in the print and on-line editions of *The New York Times*. Such images would appear to be wonderful exposure for a declining religious community seeking new members and any increased public spotlight.

The only problem is that, while Miss Love Child (Image #9) did pose for the photograph, she *neither* gave written permission for it to be published in a public source such as the *NYT*, *nor* did she ever realize that it would be used for such a purpose. Since “Self” in this religion—the emphasis and aggrandizement of the individual personality and bodily form—is shunned, looked down on, and seen as an impediment to spiritual union with the Divine Mind Substance of God, Father Divine, Miss Love Child, a long-time follower and member of Mother Divine’s personal household, would never grant approval of a portrait of herself to appear publicly in a newspaper. She would certainly never want such a photographic portrait sold. She would believe that it is the images of Father and Mother Divine which frame her in this portrait which are the significant pictures that people need in their lives, not her own.

May I draw your attention to another photograph from the Peace Mission in this international journalistic showcase: this one is of a follower named Miss Seraphim (Images 1, 2, 4). She is garbed for swimming in the unique, deliberately modest female Peace Mission bathing costume: a swimming suit worn by the female followers only when

other “Sisters” or female followers are in attendance at the private pool of Mother Divine’s residence known as Woodmont. A swimsuit only worn when male followers, “the Brothers,” and men in general are not in any way present. In a religion whose guiding principle of personal behavior is “Father Divine’s International Modesty Code,” one is not photographed in one’s swimming suit. This photograph was also taken by the same graduate of a documentary studies program who took the photo of Miss Love Child which I just brought to your attention. Miss Seraphim allowed this photograph to be taken in a moment of unguarded leisure, but again she never gave permission for it to appear for public consumption as it has on-line, in the *NYT* in December 2014, or in the *Huffington Post* in July 2015 in photo essays titled respectively, “Philadelphia: City of Father Divine,” and “These Are The Last Remaining Followers Of African American Spiritual Leader Father Divine.”

I admit that for me as a scholar of the Peace Mission and traditional American religious communitarianism, these images represent valuable ethnographic photographs of little seen dimensions of everyday life within this American movement. *But should we be looking at them, if the individuals in them would not want us to see them?* And if the photographer who created them calls herself an “artist” and not an “ethnographer,” does that designation give her license not to have direct permission to make her photographic “art” publicly known and available?

My topic today, therefore, involves two corresponding and related issues in the study of the lives of religious people in the United States by scholars and documentarians within the context of photography, and the act of photographing human subjects: 1) the relationship of fieldwork and documentary ethics; 2) the role of the ethnographic scholar versus the role of the artist in encountering and documenting religious communities. Does an artist, in this case a photographic artist, have an ethical duty to inform subjects of exactly where photographs of them will be used and where they will be posted? Does a photographic artist have an ethical right to sell photographs of individuals who had no idea that their image would be sold at the time of the photographic occasion? Should artists interested in portraying American religious communities abide by the same standards of ethics in representation as do ethnographers?

As a long-time ethnographer of the Movement, and as someone who has taken tremendous care with a reciprocal and frank relationship with the followers, I have always asked permission to use photography to chronicle them. I,

therefore, was more than concerned to find that this individual had not clearly explained in detail to the community the purpose of her work which was ostensibly to make the Peace Mission followers the central subject of a Master's project.

May I quote from a recent text message from a Peace Mission member and resident of Woodmont, the location of the enshrined bodily forms of Father and now the second Mother Divine, about these photos:

"I also know that she was told by MOTHER DIVINE whatever photography she is taken here was Only to be used for her Papers in order to graduate to which she agreed. She was also told by MOTHER DIVINE that the photos were not to be sold to which she did wholeheartedly agree." [Sic]

The photographer in question began to speak of the Peace Mission with enormous familiarity (both in professional contexts and with the members themselves and to long-time "harmonizers" such as myself), yet it was evident that she had not taken the time to make certain that these "consultants" to her work, these subjects of her photographs, understood clearly and completely what the purpose of her time with them was—that is, it is clear that the informed consent to be subjects of and/or partners in her research has not been given. This photographer also did not give the followers a complete photographic record of all the images that she took of them and their properties for their own archives, i.e. the new Father Divine Library and Museum.<sup>3</sup>

While this photographic interaction unfolded, I did contact the photographer's degree committee to express my concerns that she was proceeding without thorough explanation to the Peace Mission followers of her intent and clear purpose for the photos beyond "I am taking pictures for my school project." Her committee had a discussion with her about the importance of securing permission from the group. She was told, if she did not do so, she should severely limit the circulation of the images that she took, perhaps as narrowly as the three members of her committee. It is my understanding that she did not like this idea, but she agreed to do just that, if it was necessary. That committee was persuaded that this artist would not take any action that would compromise the community, but I was informed by one of the committee members that "she is an artist and that involves a set of practices and values that do not coincide with the professional norms of ethnography and work with human subjects."

There was more in an additional thoughtful communication:

"As for artistic practice, my understanding of the procedure in documentation is that the photographer must secure permission to use the photographs he or she takes, but owing to the priority placed on creative work as original expression, the photographer makes no commitment to allowing the subject to censor the work. The practice typically involves obtaining a legal release, a signed agreement to allow the photographer to use the work as he or she sees fit. Obviously, the norms are quite different than ethnography. But then we do not expect from art the sort of thing that we expect from the folklorist's work...[She] will not be able to present a visual account of this community that would pass the test of social science. Not even close. She will produce an artist's conception of a community, with all the foibles, shortcomings, and lack of systematic rigor that this must entail. But she will hopefully create engaging photographs. No doubt that seems strange, even objectionable from an ethnographer's perspective."<sup>4</sup>

What I wrote back was: "I must say that I just find the excuse, that an individual's "artistic" production can be free of the proper professional norms one would find in ethnographic work involving human subjects, astonishing, especially with a student working out of a Documentary Studies Program."<sup>5</sup>

Even for an artist, I would think that a Documentary Studies Program would stress that it is incumbent on students to make certain that the subjects of their photography understand exactly why they are shooting their images and approve of their exhibition and use, especially in the case of a community of elderly people. Would Documentary Studies approve of photographic work on the Amish when it is known that they have a prohibition against being photographed? Perhaps, for "artistic" reasons, they would.

This student, in fact, offered to use some of her photos of the followers as the work for an opening exhibition at the new Father Divine Library, a.k.a. a photographic exhibition of the followers' portraits. She was told by the follower who is now taking responsibility for the Movement's affairs that such an exhibition would be completely out of the question and highly inappropriate for the Sisters and Brothers who shun individual recognition for spiritual and theological reasons. The community only wants Father and Mother Divine and their physical forms to be emphasized and given due credit and recognition.

What eventually happened is that a planned exhibition of the photographs was halted, and the degree requirements were fulfilled by the photographer showing her images to her three faculty committee members. Then, in December 2014, this photographer—free of any restrictions that her degree committee would place on her—published fifteen photographs in the LENS: Photography, Video, and Visual Journalism section of the *NYT*, and they again appeared in the *Huffington Post* in a 2 July 2015 article.

In 2010 our friend Robert Orsi, writing to scholars in the field of Religious Studies, offered some thoughts that I have found especially meaningful as a religious studies scholar and as a folklorist when considering this matter and I would like to close with them. “Scholars of religion,” Orsi wrote,

think *with* other people’s lives. Sometimes we do this explicitly; at other times, the lives we think with are hidden deep in our assumptions and conclusions. But other people’s lives are always there, in one way or another. This is true even when the matters we are thinking about are huge and abstract...There are always lives within our ideas.... How do we know when we are making something that we need of them, or that we think the world needs, rather than describing and thinking about them—and engaging them—in the particular details of their circumstances.”<sup>6</sup>

It seems surprising that I also must remind those who document religious communities with photography that there are lives within our photographs of others, especially when they are displayed, distributed, and sold.

6. Robert Orsi, “Theorizing Closer to Home,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*. 38, 1-2 (2010):29. <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/winterspring2010/theorizing-closer-home>

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1. See “Encountering the Female Divine...Literally: Ethnographic Writing about Mother Divine and Father Divine’s Peace Mission Movement,” *Antropologičeskij forum / Forum for Anthropology and Culture* (2017, No 13:84-94) (Simultaneous English and Russian Language Publication).
  2. Text message, Personal Communication. 3 June 2019.
  3. <http://peacemission.info/woodmont/>.
  4. Emails, Personal Communication: 18-19 January 2014.
  5. Email, Personal Communication: 19 January 2014.



**Judith Weisenfeld**  
**Princeton University**

Although both times I have spoken at the Biennial have been in sessions about New Religious Movements, my work on the Moorish Science Temple, Father Divine's Peace Mission, the Nation of Islam, and Ethiopian Hebrew congregations did not emerge from questions related to the study of new religious movements as such.

Rather, I was interested in the co-constitution of religion and race and in understanding, within the context of African American religious history, what I came to call the groups' religio-racial identities. While the groups' theologies and practices differed, each offered an identity members believed had been divinely given but hidden by racism and enslavement and that had forced them into the false belief that they were Negro and Christian. To understand how a given member reclaimed identity as Ethiopian Hebrew, Moorish American, Asiatic Muslim, or raceless child of Father Divine in a context in which the prevailing racial structure insisted that they were Negroes, I began to think about members' embodied practices of self-making that helped to produce and maintain the groups' theologies, ritual practices, social organizations, and political positions.

I begin my book, *New World A-Coming*, with Alec Brown Bey's draft registration in 1942.<sup>1</sup> A South Carolina native who migrated to Philadelphia, he joined the Moorish Science Temple, embraced Moorish American Muslim identity and took what founder Noble Drew Ali taught was his "true tribal name" of Bey. The information printed and written on the draft card encapsulates how members' bodies asserted their religio-racial identity and challenged American structures of race and religion. Members of religio-racial movements put their bodies on the line in a religious exercise of racial agency to render themselves ungovernable under the terms of the existing religio-racial social structure but often sought religious, social, and civic participation on their own religio-racial terms.<sup>2</sup>

When he registered for the draft, Brown Bey rejected the racial categories printed on the form (White, Negro, Oriental, Indian, Filipino), asked that Moorish American be substituted, and the registrar complied. He also rejected the printed descriptors for the color of his eyes, hair, and complexion, insisting that the registrar insert "olive" for all three to represent the Moorish Science Temple's theological conception of embodiment and color. While the draft registrar complied and described Brown Bey racially and physically as he requested, the registrar also sought to contain Brown Bey within the prevailing American system, writing a brief note of challenge: "Believe he is a negro."

Does it matter to our understanding of the workings of embodiment and religion that these were *new* religious formations? Many of the embodied practices through which members asserted what they believed were their true religio-racial identities – naming, dress, diet and health, sex and sexuality – are also ways practitioners define the religious and bound religious insider from outsider in a variety of contexts not limited to new religious movements. But in the context of emerging movements, we can see the work of embodiment in relation to constructions of race, gender, sexuality, and religion *in formation* and in ways that denaturalize such categories and the theologies and practices around them in established religious groups.

Responses to some new religious movements' resistance to or revision of normative American conceptions of race, sexuality, and gender, for example, reveal much as outsiders shore up the category of "real religion" in opposition to the "cult." The interpretive mode of what anthropologist Bharat Jayram Venkat calls "comparative cultology," operates on the assumption that in the American context such groups can "only be understood through concepts and insights developed in relation to the study of other cults."<sup>3</sup> In comparative cultology, evaluation of embodiment in new religious movements, particularly with regard to questions of agency, serves the purposes of classification and othering and frames coercion and abuse as the special province of "cults."<sup>4</sup> So newness is useful in charting the dynamics of formation within groups *and* understanding the assumptions that shape outsiders' responses, whether by scholars or the general public.

Does it matter for understanding embodiment and religions in America that these are *Black* religious groups? Members well understood the politics of the Black body in U.S. history – as captive labor, as vessels for the forced reproduction of labor, as coerced labor, as segregated bodies, as victims in spectacles of Black death – and reclaimed religio-racial identities refigured their bodies via collective histories not linked to enslavement or internal colonialism.<sup>5</sup> They were also conscious of the *religious politics* of Blackness in which they were framed as the essential "primitive subject," capable *only* of embodied and emotional religious excess.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the quiet worship of the Moorish Science Temple, the respectability sermons of Ethiopian Hebrew rabbis, the Nation of Islam's rejection of "slave names" and the slave diet, and the Peace Mission's parading to dramatize the Kingdom of Father Divine, were among the many ways the groups retheologized Black embodiment and charted paths to new religio-racial identities.

Are Black new religious movements the only ones in which embodiment is a fruitful line of inquiry regarding

race, gender, and sexuality? Of course not, but the persistent conflation of race and blackness in the study of religion and American culture has made attending to whiteness as a critical analytic in new religious movements less common than it should be. Emily Clark and Brad Stoddard's forthcoming documentary reader on race and new religious movements in the USA takes a broad view of race, examining the LDS Church, Theosophy, the Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations, and Odinism as well as predominantly Black and Native American movements.<sup>7</sup> There are many other contexts across American history in which considering *whiteness* and embodiment in new religious movements would be productive, including more work on the Shakers' Era of Manifestations, on groups that appeal to Ascended Masters, like William Dudley Pelley's fascist occultist groups or Elizabeth Clare Prophet's Church Universal and Triumphant, in communities like Rajneeshpuram that draw on Asian traditions, or James Arthur Ray's New Age harmonic wealth that appropriate Indigenous ritual.<sup>8</sup>

The recent case of Nxivm and its leader Keith Raniere (referred to in the group as Vanguard), who is on trial for sex trafficking, is one in which race has been little mentioned in the media coverage, but whiteness seems to me critical for understanding the significance of gender and sexuality in this multi-level marketing, executive success, personal growth organization that promoted what it billed as a technology of ethical, rational inquiry, and especially in "DOS," the secret society in which white women (mostly) were "enslaved" to white female masters (including a corporate heiress and a television star) and in sexual relationships to Raniere himself, and the so-called slaves were branded on their abdomens to symbolize their subordination.<sup>9</sup> There is much to say about the framing and performance of white womanhood in the group in relation to Raniere's philosophy and in responses to Nxivm's practices.

There are other rich opportunities to explore gender and sexuality through embodiment in new religious movements as sites for religious theorizing gender nonconformity and non-binary identities. I have learned a great deal from Princeton graduate student Eden Consenstein's work-in-progress on Genesis P-Orridge and Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth.<sup>10</sup> And, finally, transhuman religion, such as that in Martine and Bina Rothblatt's Terasem Movement Foundation.<sup>11</sup> Transgender technologist Martine Rothblatt proposes a transhuman religion that seeks to merge humanity and artificial intelligence to achieve technological immortality. There are, no doubt, many other opportunities to engage embodiment in contemporary new religious movements that raise useful definitional questions about race, gender, and religion.

1. Judith Weisenfeld, *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).
2. On race and governance, see Sylvester A. Johnson, *African American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
3. Bharat Jayram Venkat, "Marriage and Other Shams," *Public Books*, May 10, 2019 <https://www.publicbooks.org/marriage-and-other-shams/>.
4. For a discussion of questions of embodiment and agency in responses to new religious movements, see Megan Goodwin, "Unpacking the Bunker: Sex, Abuse, and Apocalypticism in 'Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt,'" *Crosscurrents* (June 2018): 1-23.
5. Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from the Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston: Beacon, 2017).
6. See, for example, LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, "Fully Fleshed Out: Religion, Womanhood, and Blackness in Contemporary Media," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 47:1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 2019); Kathryn Lofton, "The Perpetual Primitive in African American Religious Historiography," in Edward E. Curtis IV and Danielle Brune Sigler, eds., *The New Black Gods: Arthur Huff Fauset and the Study of African American Religions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 171-191; Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929-1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
7. Emily Suzanne Clark and Brad Stoddard, eds., *Race and New Religious Movements in the USA: A Documentary Reader* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019). See also Emily Suzanne Clark, "Alternative Religious Movements and Race in America," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (January 2017), DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.50.
8. Erik Seeman, "Native Spirits, Shaker Visions: Speaking with the Dead in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 35:3 (Fall 2015): 347-373; Bradley C. Whitsel, *The Church Universal and Triumphant: Elizabeth Clare Prophet's Apocalyptic Movement* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003); Scott Beekman, *William Dudley Pelley: A Life in Right-Wing Extremism and the Occult* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005). The documentary *Wild, Wild Country* (Netflix, 2018), directed by Maclain Way and Chapman Way is the most recent engagement of Rajneeshpuram. James Arthur Ray was the subject of a

2016 CNN film, *Enlighten Us: The Rise and Fall of James Arthur Ray*. Coverage of Ray's attempt to return to the self-help industry following the deaths of three people in a seat lodge at his 2009 Spiritual Warrior retreat includes, Matthew Jacobs, "James Arthur Ray, Disgraced Self-Help Guru Sill Hopes to 'Enlighten Us'," *Huffpost*, April 29, 2016 and Matt Stroud, "The Death Dealer," *The Verge*, December 4, 2013.

9. On Nxivm's Executive Success Program, see "The Cult of Personality," *Forbes*, October 13, 2003. DOS reportedly stands for Dominus Obsequious Sororium, or "lord over the obedient female companions."
10. John Leland, "Genesis P-Orridge Has Always Been a Provocateur of the Body. Now She's at Its Mercy," *New York Times*, November 9, 2018.
11. The Terasem Movement Foundation's <https://www.terasemmovementfoundation.com/> projects include Bina48, a sentient robot meant to contain the consciousness of Bina Rothblatt and Lifonaut, which collects mindfiles and DNA storage for future use in a newly generated body. Terasem is a reference to Earthseed, the African diasporic-influenced religious world of Octavia Butler's 1993 novel, *The Parable of the Sower*. Jessica Roy, "The Rapture of the Nerds," *Time*, April 17, 1914.

### **Science, Technology, and Spirituality**

*Recent studies of the modern spiritual imagination, including the spirituality of the “nones” and spiritual-but-not-religious, have opened new inquiries into areas that once seemed settled. No longer do we assume the closed, deterministic world of science has triumphed over a world of belief in spiritual dimensions. Indeed, scientific assumptions and technologies have long shaped religious and spiritual views. How have scientific ideas both fostered secularity and religious decline and also helped people believe in the existence of unseen realms, spurring them to beliefs in other dimensions? How has science and technology caused, or at least helped, religious elements in culture to be reformulated and inspired different activities understood to be “spiritual”?*

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In October of 2017, at Saudi Arabia's "Future of Investment" summit, the approximately 400 attendees were treated to a special keynote by a woman named Sophia. Following her energizing speech that highlighted the prospective role of technology for a future economy increasingly driven by innovation, Sophia herself got a treat—it was announced that she had been granted citizenship by the government of Saudi Arabia. Sophia responded with delight, expressing that she hoped one day to vote and to attend college.

Receiving this grant of citizenship was no mean feat. Sophia, after all, was not born in Saudi Arabia. In fact, she was not born anywhere. Sophia is a humanoid, woman-gendered, AI robot, manufactured by the Hong Kong-based Hanson Robotics Corporation. And almost two years ago, she became the first machine on the planet to be granted national citizen.

The response to Sophia's receipt of citizenship evoked a range of responses, from awe and amusement to shock and outrage. There are, after all, approximately 11 million foreign workers—biological humans, that is—living in Saudi Arabia, and they are denied the right to citizenship because they are foreign-born.<sup>1</sup> How is it just, many asked, that a machine can receive rights denied to biological humans? Others pointed out that Sophia never veiled as she addressed a room full of wealthy men at the summit, despite the fact that Saudi Arabian women are traditionally required to veil when appearing in public.

Less obvious in the fray of responses was a more over-arching question: as intelligent machine applications become increasingly more human-like, what will become of humans? More specifically, what is the digital future of humanity in an age of intelligent machines? As humans are increasingly successful at instantiating cognitive capacities—thinking, reasoning—and intersubjective behavior protocols into machine systems, what will it mean to be human? Could an intelligent machine be religious?

In his *Critique de la raison nègre* ("Critique of Black Reason"), Achille Mbembe poses precisely this question about the digital future of the human in the age of neoliberal capital. He prefigures this digital human future by examining the global history of race, particularly racial Blackness. Three moments, he argues, have marked the "vertiginous assemblage" of race, its dizzying execution of delusion and destruction. First was the structured destitution through the African slave trade that transformed men and women of African origin into "human objects, human merchandise, human money" (translation, p. 3). The second moment was that of autographic Black agency—the self-

articulation of those whom Western colonizers attempted to thoroughly objectify. This self-articulation was punctuated by slave revolts and the independence of Haiti. The third moment of global racialization, Mbembe proffers, is the privatization of the world through the instruments of finance capitalism, post-imperial military infrastructure, and digital technology. Computational technology and the silicon industry, in fact, are integral to what Mbembe means by neoliberalism. This third moment is our current one, and it defines the specific challenges we must address to understand how digital technology and cybernetics are profoundly unsettling the present and future of humanity and race governance.<sup>2</sup>

It is with good reason that Mbembe examines the digital future of humanity through the lens of commoditized humans—those who were racialized as Black through the global trade in African people. For centuries, they were abducted, tortured, and reduced to objecthood. Like the necropolitical history that precedes it, this digital future of humanity is bleak. It is a "novel form of psychic life backed by artificial, digital memory and cognitive models stemming from neuroscience and the emerging neuro-economy" (translation, p. 5) in our present era.

This history of destitution, capital, and liberation has been forged in a crucible of practices, intellectual traditions, and institutions predicated on objecthood and personhood. What can things do? What relationship should people have with things? Is the Black a parcel of property? And how do we distinguish human relations with things from human relations with people? For at least five hundred years, normative claims about things versus people have been constructed on the figural and literal backs of non-White peoples fighting European domination and of marginalized Whites—the neurotic, the homosexual, the effeminate—whose humanity has been rendered illegible by associating them with Black and Indigenous peoples.<sup>3</sup> As J. Lorand Matory exquisitely demonstrates in his *Fetish Revisited* (2018), the very history of crafting racial Whiteness, of narratizing and theorizing capital, and structuring an elite interpretation of the civilized psyche has been rooted in denigrating Afro-Atlantic religions and the Black populations who have created these religious traditions. Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud invested centrally in the notion of the fetish and of fetishistic peoples (i.e., Blacks and Indigenous peoples) in order to develop their theoretical artifice. Marx particularly obfuscated the humanity and suffering of the millions of African people who were enslaved in order to abstract away the language of slavery to encode the condition of White wage workers in Europe and European settler states—he called these Whites "wage slaves." More poignantly, Charles de Brosses distilled

centuries of racial assertions in 1760 when he wrote his *Du culte des dieux fetiches*—(“Cult of the Fetish Gods”). He claimed that Black religion was irreducibly the racially innate delusion that Black people exhibited through their failure to distinguish proper relations with things from proper relations with people.<sup>4</sup>

De Brosse, like the anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racists who preceded and followed him, certainly misapprehended the theory of materiality and personhood that has characterized Afro-Atlantic religions. Despite his will to dehumanize and denigrate Blacks, de Brosse was on to something, as he recognized the normative concepts and practices of materiality in Afro-Atlantic religions contravened the norms of Western and biblical materiality.

In the coming decades, we will experience a ground-shift in the physical and semantic constitution of humans and the relationship with objects engineered to be informational, intersubjective, and personable. Human engineering—combining biological humans with machine parts and refashioning the genetic constitution of human bodies—will become more central to militarism, industry, education, recreation, healthcare, and society broadly. At the same, intelligent machine engineering will mean that cognitive machines will increasingly shape decisions about finance, healthcare, and social policy and thereby will impact a global society. If ever there *was* a human era defined by strictly human agencies that shaped and reshaped human society, we can now eulogize that era. It is over. From here on, major decisions shaping our society will increasingly be made by machines working in concert with people.

In this new present and future, the logic of materiality that governed Western concepts about so-called fetishists will appear increasingly incommensurate with normative practices and institutions. The normative concepts exemplified through Afro-Atlantic paradigms about the Orisha, by contrast, will appear far more resonant with the practical norms of the digital, neuro-economy that Mbembe anticipates.

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1. Mohammed Rasooldeen, “Saudi Arabia Has 11 Million Foreign Workers from More Than 100 Countries,” <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1201861/saudi-arabia>, accessed 6/1/2019.
  2. Achille Mbembe, *La critique de la raison nègre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013), introduction, *passim*.
  3. Londa Schiebinger, *Feminism and the Body* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New*

*World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

4. J. Lorand Matory, *The Fetish Revisited: Marx, Freud, and the Gods Black People Make* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

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The word “tune” has mysterious origins. It was, according to the dictionary, an “unexplained alteration of [the word] tone” in late Middle English. When it was first recorded in the fifteenth century, it had a religious bent. It was to “celebrate in music” in praise of the Christian God. As a verb, we now use “tune” to refer to adjusting technologies to work better. We tune an instrument for pitch or an engine so it runs. The final aspect of its definition refers to adaptation.<sup>1</sup> We fine-tune our skills. We become attuned to our environment. At times, tuning is uncertain and precarious. Is the technology sufficiently adjusted? Are we sufficiently adapted?

This multipart definition underlines the deep connection between technology and self-cultivation. Moreover, it reminds us how these factors are implicated in what may be seen as religion’s central tendency, or paradox: humans tune mediating technologies in an effort to tune out the mediation that seems to block access to the absent Other.<sup>2</sup>

This dynamic is fundamental in my current project. At a basic level, my work sets out to denaturalize “World Christianity”—that seemingly monolithic force that flows across the world—by attending to how Christians make global subjectivities. This ‘making’ is crucial since the vast majority of Christians, including those in the United States, travel rarely, if at all. It brings us back to cultivating presence in the midst of absence. They make (and remake) their global commitments by tuning their senses to foster hoped for connections with physically absent others—both the humans they picture in ‘the global church’ and other-than-human global presences, such as God, Mary, or the Holy Spirit. It is a new take on an old problem in globalization theory. In the early 1990s, sociologist David Harvey defined postmodernity as “time-space compression,” referring to how new technologies network the globe and transform one’s sense of being in the world. Shortly after, Anthony Giddens used time-space “distanciation” to distinguish between face-to-face encounters and the remote forms of sociality constitutive of globalization.<sup>3</sup>

I explore these issues through a case study: child sponsorship programs. Since their inception two centuries ago in Protestant missions, in 1816,<sup>4</sup> these fundraising plans have promised to bring faraway souls closer. They are pitched as a 1:1 relationship—a sustained commitment to benefit an individual child about whom donors are provided regular news. From the first, this idea required new technologies: printing presses, modern roadways and colonial postal systems, regular ships to transport letters and gifts overseas. Later, it incorporated snapshot photographs and films. As technologies developed, sponsorship promoters fine-tuned their programs.

Fast-forward to the 1930s. In 1938, Presbyterian pastor J. Calvitt Clarke and his wife, Helen, were U.S. sponsorship pioneers. In 1938, they founded what became Christian Children’s Fund (CCF), the first large-scale, permanent plan in the United States. In the late 1950s, it was the biggest Christian sponsorship organization in the world. For the first time, the Clarkes guaranteed sponsors a personal reply each time they sent a gift or note overseas. Right away, the system faced a major challenge; Giddens might connect it to time-space distinction. The issue was time.

As Bourdieu pointed out, culturally accepted intervals of time always elapse between a gift and its reciprocal return.<sup>5</sup> Whether a few months or a few seconds go by, those intervals are essential in making exchange legible as a social relation. Sponsorship promoters knew the same was true of the global kin-like relations they were trying to foster and their goal was always to speed time up. Letters took between 45 days to six months to be translated, checked, and shipped. These lags made Americans question if the child was real and even withdraw support.<sup>6</sup> Organizations responded by training foreign staff and children to collapse time by omitting dates, using indeterminate tenses, and making allusions to things not yet come.<sup>7</sup> The indefatigable Helen Clarke and her team daily intercepted children’s letters that violated “every tabu” she instituted. The children dated their letters. They referred to seasonal events. A sponsor could sleuth out the time elapsed before it arrived in his or her mailbox. Helen wrote, “This means that we have to rewrite translations and make all sorts of devious...explanations [to sponsors]” to hide the actual date of composition.<sup>8</sup>

Thank you letters most encapsulated the problem. Sponsors were encouraged to send gifts at any time, though CCF held all items in their Richmond office until they could ship them in one batch, usually in army ships. Even gifts of money were only processed once a month. Yet the Clarkes wanted to mirror American kinship rituals in which adults often surprise children with spontaneous gifts and are gratified with an immediate response (think Christmas). So they would send a telegram overseas as soon as CCF received a gift in Richmond. The foreign child then immediately wrote a thank you in which she was trained to omit all dates, “infer” that the gift had already arrived, and tell sponsors how happy it had made her.<sup>9</sup> In short, organizations wanted to create kin-like intimacy between far flung people in which a common creator—that is, God—was assumed to be the mediating spark. To do so, they had to obscure their own mediation—checking, holding, translating, resealing—that caused delays, which ultimately required more intensive mediation than before. Technologies like the telegram helped them do it. While

other technologies imposed limits; airmail, for example, was prohibitively expensive.

Mediating immediacy is still very much at stake for child sponsorship organizations. As in the past, they are adapting new technologies to create transglobal Christian publics—or, the tantalizing promise thereof. In about 2010, one after another the major U.S. Christian sponsorship organizations launched more complex social media platforms. As scholars note, social media tends to make users more intolerant of obvious mediation.<sup>10</sup> Sponsors are more likely to see letters as mediated when they compare them to email and social media—though these are, of course, mediated through complex technical apparatuses. Put differently, organizations are harnessing new mediated forms (email and social media) in order to replace older forms (letters) that sponsors now *view* as mediated. From an organizational perspective, perhaps the biggest challenge lies in how social media, like Facebook, potentially circumvents their ability to control—that is, mediate—sponsor-child relations. Organizations issue regular warning to sponsors not to be in contact with children outside of their network and only about ten per cent of the sponsors I worked with did so regardless. But this number will undoubtedly rise along with the spread of mobile phones and daily internet access.

For all of its potential upset to organizational authority, at a broader level I found something akin to the recent, and rather sober, assessments by media scholars who suggest that the internet does not radically shift perspectives: it creates “a multisite reality” in which there is strong affinity between offline and online behaviors.<sup>11</sup> Sponsorship organizations, and the Christian who support them, already share an “elective affinity”<sup>12</sup> with the internet as an expansive medium that combines the most resonant elements of Christian globalism’s spatiotemporal compressions. I return to this in a moment. Where social media differs from its antecedents, then, relates mainly to its capacity for “transmedia storytelling.”<sup>13</sup> This means that organizations use social media to substantiate their narrative by reinforcing it through multiple platforms at once. Sponsorship websites do this by combining video, audio, and print. They also create multiple access points for the same messages through blogs, emails, and alerts. From October 2013 to July 2017, I received approximately 11 individual emails from Compassion a month, 10 from ChildFund (formerly CCF), 6 from World Vision, and 5 from Unbound. Prior to the internet, a sponsor would have received a quarterly magazine and perhaps one monthly communication. Organizations expect that the sheer volume of content will hold sponsors’ attention and generate greater investments.

Returning to the “elective affinity” between Christian globalism and the internet, it could be argued that the promoters of nondenominational sponsorship and promoters of new media actually share overlapping visions

of worldwide networks that circumvent old institutions to unite humankind (one thinks of Marshall McLuhan’s “global village” or Mark Zuckerberg’s rhetoric about Facebook).<sup>14</sup> The internet projects seemingly limitless possibilities for connection that reiterate Christian soteriology and eschatology: one God that is limitless, that connects and encompassed all human beings. At a more practical level, it reboots participatory techniques that have defined Christian globalism for generations.

I offer just one example that brings us back to voice—the place where the word “tune” first appeared in Middle-old English. Voice lends itself to spatiotemporal compression especially well: one can mingle and harmonize one’s voice with those of others to create a feeling of expansive and visceral interconnection. The earliest U.S. sponsors, going back to the 1820s, tied linguistic harmony to Christian globalism by participating in what Anglo-Protestants called “concerts of prayer.” Using newly available printing technologies, they spread the word through tracts: to bind their far-flung churches to each other, congregants were urged to pray the same words in their different locations at an appointed day and time. Their vocal unity would rise up from across the globe.<sup>15</sup> This practice has a new life online. Thousands of sponsors coordinate united prayers through email and mobile apps. Other ministries use social media to sustain global concerts of prayer too; the 24/7 Prayer, for example, is based in the UK and coordinates people around the world in a “non-stop” prayer chain.<sup>16</sup> Contemporary sponsors often showed me relevant online tools.

Eleanor, a 62-year-old non-denominational evangelical in New Hampshire, introduced me to a video she had seen on Facebook. It was extremely moving, she told me as we opened it up. On 21 February 2016, the website informed us, OMF International<sup>17</sup> teamed up with U.S. evangelical hymn-writers Keith and Kristyn Getty to lead “an estimated 1.1 million believers together across 100 countries” in a “Global Hymn Sing.” The four-minute video opens with Kristyn Getty singing in a church in California. It then turns to a montage of congregations around the world singing the same lyrics with Getty on the appointed day. Simultaneity is heightened as each image fades into the next one, leaving a precious moment when the faces and voices are blended.

As Eleanor and I watched the video, I thought of the hyperbole in Christian claims to globalism; in this case, despite the touted 100 countries, nearly all the churches were majority white and Anglo-Protestant. Kristyn Getty’s American-accented voice sings over the others and thus seemed to lead the charge. Eleanor and I discussed my observations, but she did not find the video less compelling. Instead, she turned my attention to what theorist Lauren Berlant might call an “intimate public” that shares a “worldview and emotional knowledge” through the circulation of common texts—in this case, the video.<sup>18</sup> In



social media, this public is made manifest through comment sections in which hundreds of users post and often include their physical locations. It operates as icon and interface of globalism: it symbolizes a broad Christian network and also creates it.<sup>19</sup> The participatory techniques sponsors showed me online are in no way new—and that gives them authority—but they are also mediated in especially convincing ways. The technological affordances of the OMF video seem to strengthen each voice while reifying the role of a God that can compel and encompass so many voices at once.

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What do we make of mediated forms to express yearnings for immediacy? How do we track the ways we tune mediating technologies to attune ourselves to experience absent others? When do forms touted as new gain authority from centuries' old techniques and ideas? A different subset of my work focuses on the evangelical belief that as-yet undiscovered Jewish DNA might drive certain personal compulsions and desires.<sup>20</sup> On that note, we might also ask, how does the human body—and this brings us back to voice—mediate new technological and spiritual possibilities? One way forward is to clarify the affinities between technology and religion—not simply the instrumentalization of technology by religious people. This point isn't a new one, but it bears repeating. It is crucial if we are to better understand the evolving relation between technology and spirit.

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1. "Tune" in *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Accessed 6 May 2019. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tune>; "Tune" in *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Accessed 6 May 2019. [www.etymonline.com/search?q=tune](http://www.etymonline.com/search?q=tune).
  2. On mediation as a the central tendency of religion: Birgit Meyer, "Religious Revelation, Secrecy and the Limits of Visual Representation," *Anthropological Theory* 6, no.1 (2006): 431–53; Mattijs Van der Port, "(Not) Made by the Human Hand: Media Consciousness and Immediacy in the Cultural Production of the Real," *Social Anthropology* 19, no.1 (2011): 78; Jon Bialecki, *A Diagram for Fire: Miracles and Variation in an American Charismatic Movement* (Berkeley, CA, 2017), 198-218. As art historian M.T.J. Mitchell pointed out, there is some aspiration for immediacy any time one becomes aware of mediation. However, this dynamic is especially resonant in religious contexts where the medium—be it art, a human body, or an object—is generally thought to channel a more agentive spiritual force. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago, 2005), 214.

3. I am not doing justice to these theoretical formulations, but for our purposes mentioning this aspect is sufficient. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, 1990); Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Palo Alto, 1991), 14-15. Also, Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo, "Tracking Global Flows," in *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader* [2002], Second Edition, eds. Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo (Hoboken, N.J, 2008), 30-35.
4. The first missionaries with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions started the plans in Bombay, and then Jaffna, Sri Lanka. They seem to have gotten the idea from German-Danish missions supported by the English Church Missionary Society.
5. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Palo Alto, 1990), 98-99.
6. One example of a survey to this effect is Jae Kwon Ha, "A Study of the Ministry of Compassion of Child Care in Korea," M.A. paper, *McCormick Theological Seminary*, (May 1969), 39-40, 45, 59. Folder 1965-76, Box USA, Compassion International Unprocessed Archives, Colorado Springs, CO.
7. Anon (likely Helen Clarke), "Requirements from Superintendents of Orphanages operating under Christian Children's Fund Inc., 1950s" p. 4, misc. box 3 of 4, ChildFund Archives (CFA), Richmond, VA. On the same guidelines at World Vision: Edmund Janss, *Manual for World Vision Superintendents*, 1975, p.17-18, 20-21, folder 9, ORG/WVI 16 FY-74 Sponsorship Programs Manuals, World Vision International Archives, Monrovia, CA.
8. Helen Clarke to Mills, 17 June 1957, folder 2, box IC1, CFA.
9. Robert Arculli (PR secretary, CCF) to "Dear Friend" (orphanage superintendents), 1 October 1956. Folder 1, Box IC1, CFA.
10. Patrick Eisenlohr, "Introduction: What is a Medium? Theologies, Technologies and Aspirations," *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 19 (2011): 3.
11. Heidi Campbell, "Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2012): 80.
12. Birgit Meyer, "Mediation and Immediacy: Sensational Forms, Semiotic Ideologies and the Question of the Medium," *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 19 (2011): 35.

- (2017): 95-127; Kaell, "Semi-Public Hints of Jewish Lineage in Messianic Judaism," *Ethnos*, forthcoming.
13. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York, 2006), 121-122.
  14. David Garbin, "Global Prayers in Global Cities: Notes on Afro-Christian Spatiality in Atlanta and London," in *Global Prayers, Contemporary Manifestations of the Religious in the City*, eds. Jochen Becker, Katrin Klingan, and Stephen Lanz (Baden, Germany, 2013). Among many examples, "Mark Zuckerberg on a Future Where the Internet Is Available to All," *Wall Street Journal*, 7 July 2014. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/mark-zuckerberg-on-a-future-where-the-internet-is-available-to-all-1404762276>.
  15. Kaell, "Worshipping in Concert with the World," *Journal of Modern American History* 1, no. 2 (2018): 277-282.
  16. They cite as their inspiration the non-stop "prayer watch" that Moravians instituted in 1727 to unite and encourage their growing missionary outposts. It overlaps significantly with the Scottish concerts of prayers that developed shortly after. Sebastian Schüler, "Unmapped Territories: Discursive Networks and the Making of Transnational Religious Landscapes in Global Pentecostalism" *PentecoStudies* 7, no. 1 (2008): 55-60; "24-7 Prayer: Reviving the Church, Reviving the Culture," accessed 11 November 2018. <https://www.24-7prayer.com/>.
  17. Formerly Hudson Taylor's China Inland Mission, the name changed to OMF in 1965 after it was clear that it was not going to be allowed to return to China after the 1950 expulsion of foreign missionaries.
  18. Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, N.C., 2008), viii.
  19. Martijn Oosterbaan, "Virtually global: Online Evangelical Cartography," *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 19, no.1 (2011): 70. A similar feeling often pervades conferences or other events where Christians of many backgrounds come together, for example in Kevin O'Neill, *City of God: Christian Citizenship in Postwar Guatemala* (Berkeley, 2009), 170-197; Coleman, "Only (Dis-)Connect: Pentecostal Global Networking as Revelation and Concealment." *Religions* 4 (2013): 375; Robert Wuthnow, *Boundless Faith: The Global Outreach of American Churches* (Berkeley, 2009), 205.
  20. Sarah Imhoff and Hillary Kaell, "Lineage Matters: DNA, Race, and Gene Talk in Judaism and Messianic Judaism," *Religion and American Culture* 27, no.1

**Christopher White**  
**Vassar College**

I think one throughline working its way in our three papers is thinking about how new scientific ideas and technologies are shaping new kinds of religious or spiritual subjectivities. Hillary's paper examined how Christians used mediating technologies to "tune" themselves into global Christian consciousness; and Sylvester's paper looked at on how intelligent machines could give us new ways of thinking about objecthood, personhood and race.

In my work I've also been interested in these issues, with my new book (*Other Worlds: Spirituality and the Search for Invisible Dimensions*) showing how Americans and Europeans in the last century have used fantastic scientific ideas such as higher dimensions or parallel universes to develop new enchanted worldviews.

I started researching this book because I was intrigued by some surprising data. Beginning in the early 1990s, surveys showed that Americans were participating less and less in traditional religious congregations—they were praying less, going to church less, & even disaffiliating from religious groups. However, they also continued to have robust imaginative lives. Americans in particular have a robust belief in supernatural things: they still report believing in gods, angels, heaven, spirits, other spiritual worlds, UFOs, and so on, at very high levels.

So, I got interested in how today's many unchurched or "spiritual" people constructed their sense of a sacred cosmos, how they understood the origin, nature, meaning and (secular) limits of the universe. This became for me a question about the imagination—about what Arjun Appadurai and others have called the *social imaginary*, that is, the symbolic dimension of the social world that we use to understand and represent our collective life. So, I started thinking—what are the shared texts and narratives that Americans use to talk about and imagine the world today? In my view there are important new sources for our sacred narratives: 1) fantastic scientific concepts that are discussed in popular science, 2) science fiction, & 3) other TV/film narratives we see in pop culture.

The fantastic scientific idea that I focus on in the book is the idea that the universe has hidden layers, spaces or dimensions. I talk about how different people used this concept to make supernatural beliefs possible again for themselves and others—indeed to make supernatural beliefs seem more scientific and thus more believable. I researched artists who wanted to develop visionary forms of painting or sculpture, screenwriters who developed scifi shows like *The Outer Limits*, *One Step Beyond* or *the Twilight Zone*; hippie physicists who left science and become spiritual teachers; fantasy and scifi writers, some Christian, some Jewish, many

agnostic or "spiritual"; theosophical architects building higher dimensional symbols into the built environment, televangelists preaching about spiritual dimensions, and others. Of course, the impulse to make religious or spiritual ideas more scientific goes back to the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment. So, this is not a new idea, even if the context today might be new. One thing that is new today is that the ideas in physics have gotten more fantastic while our technologies have gotten more uncanny. Another factor here is that print and electronic media now make thinking about these issues and dilemmas quite widespread.

Let me spend the rest of my time thinking about some ongoing issues related to science, technology and spirituality in American culture.

First, who owns scientific ideas? Who controls their meaning? Most scientists have talked about higher, invisible dimensions as imperceptible spaces but spaces that are nevertheless material and physical. They are inclined to emphasize this fact when confronted with New Age believers like Deepak Chopra or Shirley Maclean who assert things like science has proven the existence of a spirit world! So there are questions here about who controls the meaning of an idea like "higher dimensions." I think a couple things are happening. Scientists who might argue that science should exclude metaphysical speculation nevertheless speculate about big questions in certain settings. So, we might just acknowledge that they are being inconsistent. Of course, the temptation to speculate about big questions gets stronger in that genre we call "popular science," a genre in which scientists need to generate buy-in from readers, convince others of the importance of science, and persuade granting agencies of the importance of their research. Historians have talked about popular science as the place where the meaning of science gets negotiated, and I think this is certainly the case here. What does it mean to talk about or discover an invisible space? What does it mean to talk about the existence of other universes? What is the impact of this way of thinking on our ways of thinking about the relative plausibility of things we'd call spiritual—a heavenly afterlife, the existence of guardian angels, and so on? Many scientists wouldn't be happy to hear this, but fantastic scientific ideas such as higher dimensions have for many people made fantastic *religious or spiritual* ideas seem more plausible. They've certainly done that kind of imaginative work.

Second, how are ideas mobilized for particular reasons, for particular projects of reform or liberation? The American writer Madeleine L'Engle, a New Yorker who was raised Protestant, became by her 20s an agnostic because the churches were patriarchal and dogmatic. Later

she acquired what we could call a re-enchanted imagination by reading popular science books about Einstein's insights and higher dimensional notions. She developed her new worldview while writing *Wrinkle in Time*, which became a kind of sacred narrative to her, one in which female characters were given a full humanity, unlike one-dimensional female characters in most popular fantasy and sci-fi up until her time. So L'Engle embraced new scientific ideas that showed her the complexity and openness of the cosmos, stimulated a sense of awe, wonder and humility, and allowed her to cast aside traditional roles and expectations for women. So, her appropriation of this fantastic scientific idea allowed her to be spiritual in new ways that were liberating for her and for the many women and girls who read her books. (There are something like 10 million copies of *Wrinkle* in print.)

A second example illustrating how ideas are mobilized in certain ways would be W. E. B. Du Bois, who used the idea of an invisible higher space in an unpublished short story entitled "A Vacation Unique." In this exploratory narrative, a black Harvard undergraduate convinced a white classmate to undergo a "painless operation" that would make him black—it would be stepping into a new region of the universe in which he would be both races and neither, both visible and invisible, rising above racial classifications into a higher-dimensional vantage point on reality. From this vantage point he would be able to see clearly how everything had been laid out in America, with its carefully gridded hierarchies of decorum and privilege, with its invisible class and color lines. Here Du Bois deployed the metaphysical fourth dimension in order to locate another geography, an "impossible geography" above inflexible American hierarchies, in which white people might see their privilege and black people might see beyond boundaries that constrained them.

Finally, a more general point. Secular scientific ideas have reorganized religious perspectives, but I'm not just interested in ideas. New *technologies* also organize new practices and new forms of *experience*. In my new work I'm turning more and more to electronic technologies and experience. How for example did wireless radio make possible new ways of experiencing religion? How about television or the Internet? How does digital culture now structure our subjectivity in certain ways? How has electronic tech indulged our "fantasy of disincorporation"; how do technologies create new kinds of prayers that reach into new kinds of beyond spaces? How do they bring to our religious lives a new aesthetic of flow and transmissibility? How do they change the ways we think about and practice the mediation of spirit—as for example when we place our hands on a TV screen to feel the healing power coming from a Pentecostal preacher on TV? How do films and TV shows create a new sense of wonder or of the sublime via special effects? How do electronic technologies organize the practices and the sensations of belief? I hope we'll have a

chance to discuss these questions during our Q and A. Thanks.

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1. Nancy Bentley, "The Fourth Dimension: Kinlessness and African American Narrative," *Critical Inquiry* 35:2 (Winter 2009), 270–292.
  2. Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 202.

### **Looking Ahead**

*This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, after several major national meetings in the 1980s, as an effort to coordinate the efforts of those studying American religions and perhaps help to shape a more coherent field. Activities such as the founding of a journal, the Young Scholars in American Religion Program, and most recently the Biennial Conferences have been efforts toward those goals. Two driving questions behind these and other activities have been: “what needs to be done that isn’t being done to further this field of study?” and “what needs to be done better to further this field of study?” Given the changes in scholarship and academia, as well as our understanding of the subject, now is a good moment to pose that question again. Beyond looking at new topics or developing new methodologies, what sort of institutional or public structures need to be developed? What common activities, networks, and formats need to be created or improved to significantly extend new insights into the relationship of religion to other aspects of American culture?*

**Rudy V. Busto**  
**University of California, Santa Barbara**

Fifty years ago, apropos anniversaries, Yale ethicist, James Gustafson, edited a collection of scholarly assessments of “American Religion” for *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Gustafson’s roster of experts took as their prompt the “radical change” in religion provoked by “the most significant events in American religious life” in the sixties: including Vatican II, “clergy involvement in the civil rights movement, the ‘death of God’ theology, the tensions between Christians and Jews after the [Israeli 6-day] June War, the involvement of religious leaders in the peace movement, [and] the revolution in morality.”<sup>1</sup> These events, Gustafson noted, were “far more memorable” because of the wide press coverage given them, rather than the events he thought probably should have been headlined: the World Council of Church meetings in Evanston and New Delhi, the passing of Pius XII, and national meetings of rabbis.<sup>2</sup> Gustafson opined that the word ‘crisis’ more than “change” was “perhaps more appropriate with reference to religion than it is with reference to some other aspects of our culture and society. In its state of crisis,” he continued, “American religion has become a far more interesting phenomenon than it was during the decade of its highest institutional success [the 1950s].” And following this morning’s panel on crisis we can certainly view Gustafson’s project as responding to a perceived threat to the field’s status quo.

To take up the enormous task set before him Gustafson selected scholars who, in his judgment, could offer “comprehensive coverage.” Given the multiple ways that American Religion (or more precisely for our framing, *the study, teaching, and translating of American Religion*) in 2019 has been articulated as in “crisis” over the past two days, a glance back at Gustafson’s American Religion time capsule, is instructive—or at least entertaining if not horrifying—to this room.<sup>3</sup>

Gustafson’s collection of fourteen essays is a who’s-who roster of the time, (although I wonder if anyone under fifty in this room will recognize more than one or two names). Sydney Ahlstrom opens with an essay on why a “sudden, traumatic, and disruptive” radical turn in theology and ethics occurred in the 1960s. Among the other rather predictable thirteen pieces is Eugene Borowitz’s “Jewish Theology Faces the 1970s”; James Cone on “Black Consciousness and the Black Church,” Ernest Sandeen on “Fundamentalism and American Identity,” and Jeffrey Hadden on “Clergy Involvement in Civil Rights.” Closing out the volume is Richard John Neuhaus, the pastor of New York City’s St John the Divine, on “The War, The Churches, and Civil Religion.”<sup>4</sup>

With the exception of Neuhaus, all of the contributing writers held PhDs, and of these fifteen PhDs, including Gustafson, all were earned east of the Mississippi; ten are from Ivys (Harvard five, Yale two, Columbia three), two from Chicago, and one each from Northwestern, and Wisconsin-Madison (the sociologist Hadden); fourteen out of fifteen PhDs are from private universities.<sup>5</sup> All of them held positions east of the Mississippi. With the exception of James Cone, all of the writers are white, and all of the contributors are male. Thirteen of the fifteen (adding back Neuhaus) are Christian, two Jewish. I warned you: entertaining if not horrifying seen from 2019.

To make an irresponsible but fun comparison: This meeting’s presenters, plus convener Goff: twenty-five PhDs. Twenty-one from schools east of the Mississippi. Seventeen from private institutions; eight public. Ten from the Ivys (Harvard three, Princeton three, and one each from Yale, Columbia, Pennsylvania, and Brown); Two from Virginia, and one each from Union Theological Seminary, Notre Dame, Georgetown, UC-Santa Barbara, Rice, Colorado-Boulder, Northwestern, Chicago, Memphis, Berkeley, Emory, UMass-Amherst, and UNC-Chapel Hill. Twenty-two of the twenty-five work east of the Mississippi; three in the west. Eighteen of the twenty-five are “white” (lets use 1970’s broad meaning of “white”); seven scholars of color. Twelve are women; eleven are men. Woefully unscientific, this comparison is, nevertheless, revealing of both how far conclaves of American religion have come, and, perhaps how chronic the patterns of expertise and training persist since Gustafson’s publication.

What this meeting does have in common with Gustafson’s group is that both are organized within the context of national tribulation, “crisis” both real and imagined. From our vantage point Gustafson’s assemblage is, however, too narrow. It is institutionally focused, and, although having survived the turbulent Sixties, it is clear from Ahlstrom’s blaring check engine light that the Protestant-Catholic-Jew troika wheels are beginning to wobble. What we know now—and what Gustafson’s group is clearly worried about—is that by the end of the 1970s’ Will Herberg’s American-made apparatus would be ready for the scrap heap. Winston King’s “Eastern Religions: A New Interest and Influence,” arguably the most interesting essay and one that should be widely read, explains and predicts how the loss of faith in the “American Kingdom of God” would give way to the “strong appeal” of Asian spiritualities steadily trickling into the culture and in need of explanation. Here, Will Herberg’s conformist America will recede before a stretchy Lululemon downward dog.<sup>6</sup>

Again, we have the advantage of fifty years hindsight, and the holes in Gustafson's collection are vast. Looking back at the landmark events of 1960s' that would influence religion, we would most certainly omit items from Gustafson's list and, instead, replace them with (here's my list): the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Reform Act that would dramatically change the nation's demographics; the feminist movement; Woodstock; ethnic power movements; Stonewall, the moon landing (and behind that the development of the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET) that coalesced information and defense technologies (the first "email" message sent in 1969 from UCLA to the Stanford Research Institute); the rumblings of white evangelicalism into an activist subculture; Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1960) the catastrophic "Santa Barbara Oil Spill," (1969) (stretching from Santa Barbara to the Mexican border); NFL 1 (January 1967), Cassius Clay's conversion to Islam and conscientious objection to the Vietnam War, and maybe, just maybe Barney and Betty Hill's alien abduction (September 1961)...you can add to the list.

The panel's prompt, as I first encountered it read like the beginning of a Crisis Management Plan, and a call for a S.W.O.T analysis. Crisis management, as the MBAs among you know, is a devious set of tools for responding quickly and strategically to frame disaster. It is largely a set of public relations strategies meant to contain and spin disasters rather than prevent them. That is, for example, how do we respond, "tune," and frame the importance of religious studies to deans, committees, STEM colleagues, trustees, legislatures and politically influential publics? How can we re-frame, reconfigure, re-brand our work effectively so that the study of American religion is legible across different teaching environments? How might we use the strategies of corporate industry to counteract the tone-deaf MBAs that have taken over the university?

How do we proceed under, what David Watt described yesterday as "working under precarious situations"?

Let me end with the suggestion that we engage in a "SWOT" analysis to tease out and clarify our moment of crisis. Even a simple listing of: "S"—Strengths, "W"—weaknesses; "O"—Opportunities; and "T"—Threats can be helpful preparation for planning and action. Here's my quick and dirty list driven by our conversations and the comparison of Gustafson's 1970 collection with this meeting, for each SWOT category: "Strength," "Weakness," "Opportunity," and "Threat"—most of them familiar:

*Strengths:* (...the shortest list!)

\* Interdisciplinarity and the ability for the study of American religion to move adeptly across and incorporate humanities, social science, and even hard science theories and methods;

\* Cultural, gender and racial diversity within the field; leading to diversity in perspectives, projects and variety;  
 \* Presence and availability of research "data" as Americanists for whom "religion" is everywhere, every day, and consequently always being processed, connected, and analyzed.

*Weaknesses:*

\* The field still skewed by an "East of the Mississippi" perspective (and correlated the analysis of race as largely a white/black affair);  
 \* The growing divide between private and public graduate programs that favor Ivys—not on the basis of "better training" but on the basis of financial support;  
 \* "Border parochialism," that is, a yawning lack of interest/expertise/comparison with hemispheric America. We have scholars with us this weekend who work in Canada, but none from the rest of the hemisphere;  
 \* The "World Religion" survey course model that gives students a false picture of religions as equal, interchangeable and easily understood for purposes of comparison;  
 \* The tendency to replicate faculty retirements using traditional "area subject" categories (vs. thematic innovation such as new and emergent technologies);  
 \* The undermining of our work opportunities by our own organizations: to wit, the AAR's job announcement for a "Chief Public Engagement Officer" that prefers degrees other than religion or a related field.

*Opportunities:*

\* STEM connections, including courses (Science Fiction, First Contact, Cognitive science), and publishing in science journals (e.g., *Acta Astronautica*);  
 \* Robust curricula for undergraduate double majors and minors. We need better publicity and advocacy for why the study of American religion is critical for understanding politics, international relations, health care, race and ethnic relations, sex and gender disparities, economic inequality, and the environmental crises;  
 \* Hispanic and other minority serving institution religion curricula that serve to recalibrate the way we as scholars understand and as teachers educate a more comprehensive American religious history and experience;  
 \* K-12 education in the study of religion;  
 \* Public Humanities outreach for all of the reasons outlined above;  
 \* Connections with local religious communities for programming and fund raising;  
 \* Coordinated American Religion scholar public/political activism/network, including, for example, a clearinghouse for tracking patterns and trends in PhD completion, employment and movement;

*Threats:*

\* Institutional shifts to STEM and professional schools and "practical" majors partially driven by rising tuition and parental pressure;

\* The corporatization of universities and especially the monetizing of curricula and the cost-benefit view of the humanities as quaint, removed from the real world, and irredeemably effete and arcane;

\* The collapse of divinity schools and seminaries and the inability by broader publics to understand the historic centrality of these institutions;

\* The institutional move to contingent faculty;

\* “Service” department status that feeds into how administrators regard us for purposes of tenure-track hiring, replacement hiring, and other institutional support;

\* Public misperception of what we do that may be driven in part by religious zealotry. We all have stories about airplane conversations where we have to correct our curious seatmate about how what we do is different from ministry; and how evangelical undergraduates avoid our courses because what we teach is corrosive to their worldview.

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1. James M. Gustafson, “Foreward,” *The Sixties: Radical Change in American Religion, The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 387 (January 1970), ix.

2. The WWC’s second meeting in Evanston, in August 1954 is actually outside Gustafson’s timeline. The Delhi, third meeting took place in December 1961. Pius XII passed in October 1959; Gustafson doesn’t specify which rabbinical organizations.

3. I was also drawn to the 1967 *Daedalus* “Religion in America” issue (Volume 96:1) for comparison, noting a similar demographic sweep with Gustafson’s collection (e.g., all thirteen contributors are male, white, and either Christian or Jewish): Robert Bellah, Franklin Littell, William McLoughlin, Langdon Gilkey, Martin Marty,

Thomas O’Dea, Harvey Cox, Daniel Callahan, Wilber Katz, Harold Sutherland, Emil Fackenheim, Milton Himmelfarb, Michael Novak.

4. Gustafson notes what is missing in the collection: “the growth of academic study of religion, and its maturation into significant scholarly disciplines, with new or upgraded journals,” “an essay that would deal more particularly with what is happening to black churches during this decade,” “an assessment of what happened to [civil religion] in the decade,” “a study focusing on religion on the campuses, a bellwether of wider currents in the culture” (ix).

5. Yale: Gustafson Laney; Harvard: Ahlstrom, Stylianopoulos, King, Fichter, Callahan; Columbia: Borowitz, Vogel, Bianchi; Chicago: Luecke, Sandeen, Northwestern: Cone; Wisconsin-Madison: Haddon (Sociology). Richard Neuhaus, MA, Concordia.

6. am reminded of Herberg’s statement “Not to be – that is, not to identify oneself and be identified as – either a Protestant, a Catholic, or a Jew is somehow not to be an American. It may imply being foreign, as is the case when one professes oneself a Buddhist, a Muslim, or anything but a Protestant, Catholic, or Jew, even when one’s Americanness is otherwise beyond question.” *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay on American Religious Sociology* (New York: Doubleday, 1955), 257-258.

7. Sandeen’s focus on 1920s Fundamentalism blinded him to the nascent connection to right wing ideologies to the left of anti-Communism. He predicts wrongly that “Though the movement of the Radical Right has not evaporated, and still appeals to many Fundamentalists, the identification of the two now seems unlikely. For a reassessment see Axel Schafer’s collection, *American Evangelicals and the 1960s* (Wisconsin, 2013).



**Laura Levitt**  
**Temple University**

I think that the field of North American Religions has grown significantly over the past thirty years. The kinds of papers presented at academic conferences are now more diverse in terms of content, in other words, in terms of what constitutes North American religion. The term does not refer to one singular tradition and its various iterations. Rather, it refers to a plurality of communities and practices and, in some instances, the beliefs or creeds of those communities. We see this pluralizing in the proliferation of smaller more diverse conferences, numerous blogs, and lots of new books. This diversity is also very much on display in a rich array of strong book series in North American Religions at a number of academic presses (UNC, NYU, Chicago, Stanford, and Oxford to name a few).

Lots of different traditions are more a part of the discourse, Afro-Caribbean traditions, Border traditions, Indigenous practices and communities, Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh, Hindu, Jewish, and New Religious Movements are a part of the discourse. And there is also and importantly, a powerful and sustained engagement with a broad range of African American religious traditions and the cultures that surround them (Here I am thinking of strong book series at some of the already named presses in African American religious traditions, as well as works in Penn State's Religion Around series where Tracy Fessenden's acclaimed *Religion Around Billie Holiday* was published in 2018. I am honored and excited to play a small role in these efforts as an editor of NYU Press's North American Religions Series (with Tracy Fessenden and David Harrington Watt), as an editor at *Religion and American Culture* (RAAC) and as a mentor for Young Scholars in American Religion (YSAR 2019).

What are some of the key challenges before us?

Here I include some of the following:

How do we more fully engage across the inter- and interdisciplinary boundaries that often make it difficult to connect to scholars whose academic homes have not been in North American religions? These include intra-disciplinary scholars who work on African American traditions, Indigenous traditions, scholars who write about the practices and histories of American Buddhists, Sikh and Hindu communities in North America, American Jews, and American Muslims. Or, how do we think more richly about the ways religion informs the scholarly work, the religion around all kinds of American studies scholarship? And what do we do with the problem of conflicting conferences? The Middle Eastern Studies Association (MESA), the American Studies Association (ASA), and Anthropology meetings, for example often overlap with the American Academy of Religion (AAR). Who attends what conferences and what

kinds of conversations are and are not possible given these structural constraints?

How do we think about who reads what? Which scholars are the primary or secondary readers of what kinds of books and articles? As the fields shift to address the sounds of religion, for example, how do we network to find appropriate readers for articles and book manuscripts devoted to music or any of the other sounds of religious expression?

How do we signal to readers the range of scholarly questions, methodologies, and practices that inform our field as we ask for new forms of expertise to come into these conversations?

How do we deal with new media, the openness of live streaming, its promises and its pitfalls? How do we create safe spaces for hard conversations and not, at the same time, produce new barriers?

And disagreements, how do we handle conflict? In these volatile times, how do we disagree? How do we hear the hurt all around us and confront our own blind spots, our missteps, as well as some of the kinds of injuries that also shape the work of many of our colleagues and even our own scholarship? When do we call out, and when do we work behind the scenes? Who does what labors?

Moreover, how can more of us who have various forms of privilege (race, class- stable jobs, livable wages- gender and sexual privileges), do more of the work that often falls on the shoulders of those who are most vulnerable?

And finally, how are we going to deal with the real structural inequities that now form our field and its various subfields? How are we going to think creatively about the future of scholarship given the huge and growing percentage of those of us entering and already a part of the field whose jobs are precarious and contingent? Or, for that matter, how do we deal with those of us with stable positions that will disappear with us? How might we intervene in these structural challenges? Can we as academics in the Humanities think creatively about accreditation as a site for insisting on full-time faculty positions? What are the minimum number of faculty, full-time faculty necessary for a department to offer a major, a minor, or, in a different way, a viable graduate program?

And even as we try to maintain academic positions in colleges and universities, we also need to think about how we might imagine the production of scholarship in venues other than the academy. How can we embrace colleagues

who work in the Not for Profit world as administrators and advocates or those who are now teaching in secondary schools? How can we who have seniority support those who work in these other venues? What kinds of fellowships might become available? What kinds of incentives for scholarly publications might come from these working sites?

And even as we think outside of our institutions, we also need to think more critical about what goes on in our institutions. How can we support those who are contingent among us at our universities and colleges right now? What kinds of resources could be better made available? Why shouldn't travel grants and research funds be awarded to adjunct and nontenured-track faculty? What about administrators? What kinds of summer institutes might be created to support this growing cadre of scholars in North American Religions working outside of the academy?

Having recently become familiar belatedly with a college very different from the urban public research university where I have taught for over 25 years, I am more keenly aware of how even among those of us who are fortunate enough to have full-time and/or tenured or tenure-track jobs, the working conditions can be so very different. It is not only teaching loads, but also resources for research or course development or how much time we spend in faculty governance or bureaucratic activities (filling out forms, assessment, internal reports, or actually serving on powerful college committees). There are so many inequities among and between us. And there is so much anxiety and tension, all around. How can we begin to address the affective registers of our work environments, of our profession and the toll it takes on all of us?

**Rhys H. Williams**  
**Loyola University Chicago**

I come to the task of “looking ahead” with a variety of past experiences—including 30 years as a fully employed tenure-track or tenured faculty member, several terms as a department head/chair in two different universities, chairing various college and university-level task forces, experiencing editing two different journals, and officer positions in several scholarly societies, both disciplinary and multi-disciplinary. I also note that I have been to a number of the Biennial Conferences, both as presenter and attendee, including the very first one.

These, of course, are all recounted as ‘looking back,’ even as the task here is to look ahead, but I cannot do the latter without the former. From that perspective, sitting in all the sessions on both days, I will say that I found a lot of what was said in the presentations and discussions to be familiar.

I say that NOT as the grumpy wise old man who has seen it all before and therefore is not impressed. Rather, I say that with a positive spin—as a collective we are engaging questions and issues that are both timely – politics, refugees, teaching, bodies and religion—and in a way timeless—religious meaning, community, spirituality, social inequality, cultural alienation. It is confirming to recognize that as a scholarly collective we are not just chasing fads and breathlessly reporting every development as new and totally unique. We are taking the current issues and phenomena on the table, and examining them in terms of the social and cultural dynamics that are enduring and significant. I feel heartened, as I regularly do at gatherings that are particularly marked by younger scholars and fresh perspectives. It is intellectually and inter-personally energizing.

Which is not to say that I don’t worry. While ‘crisis’ language has been presented, debated, and critiqued here, it is not going too far to note that politically, socially, culturally, and institutionally, at this particular temporal moment, there are distinctive challenges to the study of religion in U.S. higher education. Thus, I look ahead here, noting both the promise and the peril.

### *Higher education’s challenges*

First and foremost, U.S. higher education is facing a demographic trough of 18 to 24 year olds—the heart of our traditional constituency. This is hitting some regions, states, and local settings harder than others, but it is nonetheless universal. Every college or university is either facing these enrollment pressures now or gearing up to facing them. It is a simple fact that the post-secondary institutional infrastructure that emerged post-WWII has too much capacity to continue to thrive with the diminished numbers

of traditional college-age students. Expanding the demographic groups that we offer education to is an absolute necessity.

Moreover, what we are really facing a shortage of is 18-24 year olds whose parents can afford increasingly pricey tuitions. General economic polarization is eating away at the middle class, and those population groups that have expanding numbers of young people are not on the wealthier end of the spectrum. Thus, significant financial aid and tuition discount rates are all the more necessary. The competition for blue chip first-year students—students from families with the financial resources to pay full tuition and the educational background to be fully ready for college-level work—has led to a type of ‘arms race’ of student services, such as health services, career counseling, better quality dorm food, and climbing walls in fancy recreational center. All these have price tags as well.

A second challenge, which is one that I know scholars of religion can relate to, is college and university administrations overly enamored with STEM (science, technology, education, math) fields. The intertwined assumptions that these fields attract more students who believe there are more jobs there, and that these fields attract more external funding—through both grants and patents—make administrators eager to promote STEM. The eagerness to produce students who can be effective workers in the current economy, is further coupled with a fascination with “entrepreneurship”—a touchstone of neoliberal economic thinking in which everyone is an individual economic agent, risking capital and hustling to strike it rich. Altogether, these impulses have driven universities to be more interested in producing economically viable workers, rather than citizens.

A third challenge, particularly for those in public universities, is state legislatures who have continually cut budgets for state support (while often criticizing schools for raising tuition). They often seem to believe that less financial support will somehow magically produce healthier institutions, no matter what the data show, treating the famed “Laffer Curve” as some type of sacred object. On the other hand, some state legislators (and national ones, for that matter) are quite openly and consciously hostile to critical thought, intellectualism, expertise, or institutions that can serve as bases of organizing political or social opposition.

These challenges to funding institutions of higher education have consistently led to the desire for a more ‘liquid’ and contingent workforce—more part-time instructors and adjunct faculty, who are not given benefits with their pay, do not receive retirement funds, and have none of the guarantees of job security or academic freedom

that tenure affords. Tenured or tenure-track faculty now compose about 25% of all those people who teach college courses.

The effects on those scholars who are caught in adjunct-land are severe, and considerably documented. I don't have much to add to that story, other than to voice my support for their efforts to have decent jobs and noting that if university administrations complain about non-tenure track faculty organizing unions (as they do at Loyola University Chicago) they have no one but themselves to blame.

Here, however, I want to call attention to the ways that the increasingly contingency of the higher education instruction force is adversely affecting those on the tenure track, as well as university institutional health in general. First, the professional lives of tenure-track faculty are competitive and pressured as never before. Scholarly publishing is now a virtual requirement for every job, even those considered primarily teaching oriented. It requires more publications to get a job, and to get tenure, than before (indeed, job candidates and untenured professors are often being judged by people who have fewer publications than they do). Cut-backs in higher-education funding from state and federal governments have put more pressure on faculty to generate revenue through grants and contracts with external agencies or foundations (even as many funding agencies, such as the National Science Foundation, have had their budgets cut). External funding is increasingly a job requirement, even among those scholars in disciplines that historically have not had access to funding sources.

But I want to call special attention to the pressures on 'service' dimensions of the faculty job. With more publishing to do, and increased pressures for quality teaching and student contact hours (and a corresponding demand for letters of recommendation), what parts of 'service' might suffer? Doing fewer reviews of manuscripts for journals and academic publishers? On one hand, that makes sense—it is 'free labor' that doesn't count for much on merit and promotion metrics, and it is increasingly free labor done for journals that are published by for-profit publishers who charge academic libraries scandalously high prices for their journals.

But journals and academic books are the life-blood of our profession. And peer review is one of the defining aspects of the professoriate as a profession. Professions, by definition, lodge the control of the criteria for inclusion and control of the quality of work in the members of the profession. If we don't have peer review—even with all its faults—what we are doing is more like journalism or blogging than it is academic scholarship.

Similarly, promotion and tenure reviews take up enormous amounts of time and intellectual energy. And with

fewer tenure-track faculty, those of us still here are asked to do ever more of them. But do we say 'no' to that? At a purely human level, someone's career is on the line. However, again, the institutional issue is the control of the quality of labor resting with the professional (labor) itself. This is directly a labor issue, and as faculty we need to insist on a significant role in who is faculty and how they are rewarded.

Whether planned or not, one consequence of the decreasing number and percentages of tenure-track faculty is a strain on faculty's capacities to participate meaningfully in shared governance in our institutions. If we don't do it, administrators and others will different agendas and visions of the university will. So, the question "what will I do less of?" in order to manage my work life has consequences not just for me, but for the ways in which academic institutions are governed and who they are open to and reward.

#### *Possibilities in faculty responses*

How should we, as faculty in the humanities and social sciences, respond to these circumstances? Well, my dean says we should attract more students, attract more external funding, and attract more public attention. Okay then. But seriously, we have to respond institutionally. And we must respond

One response by Sociology has been consolidated under the rubric "public sociology." It is sometimes called 'applied' sociology, or 'engaged' scholarship, or even 'clinical' sociology, but the term 'public' sociology has become far more common, and absorbed several other terms, since it was the theme of Professor Michael Burawoy's 2004 Presidential address to the American Sociological Association. Nonetheless, it is a fairly amorphous category; three meanings are quite common, although they are not exclusive nor exhaustive in their use.

First is the notion of communicating self-consciously with publics of various sorts. This means intentionally writing or speaking so that the imagined audience is more than the 400 scholars who share your sub-disciplinary specialty. While this is not necessarily easy to do—unlearning academic writing is as hard as learning it—several colleagues over the weekend have offered us perspective on this, from Heath Carter's list of blogs, websites, and digital media by scholars to XXXX XXXX's expertise on using social media to get our findings outside the academy.

But public sociology can also move beyond 'translating' research to publics, or speaking in more accessible language to the idea of engaging research questions that are important to publics in the first place—thus predisposing them to pay attention to the research findings in the first place. Of course, this practice can be a radical break from traditional ways of finding research

questions. We often root the search for the question in scholarly literatures and conversations—what isn't being studied, or even what data are available. This suggests finding out what issues, questions, or problems motivate publics and orient our research that direction.

We need to recognize that not all publics have the same issues or questions in mind, and sometimes people don't even know they will find something interesting or useful until presented with it. Further, cooperation with publics in defining our questions can become co-optation, as those with funding or large audiences get to dictate the agenda rather than it staying rooted in the academy or intellectual tradition. Those scholars who work in the "action research" tradition (sometimes called "participatory action research") are deeply immersed in this dilemma and have thought long and carefully about how scholars should work to find questions that publics care about but that still serve both greater social goods and scholarly agendas.

Third, some take the idea of public sociology as a complete repudiation of the ideal of 'objective' or 'value neutral' social science and challenge any boundaries between scholarship and issue advocacy. While conservatives within sociology often lament this as sacrificing our status as a 'science,' others point out that keeping that boundary between science and advocacy, between facts and values, hasn't save economics, biology, or climate science from recent political controversy. And many note that American sociology itself was founded in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with a distinct 'social work' impulse aimed at ameliorating social problems and fostering societal change. Jane Addams, the founder and leader of the Hull House settlement movement, was in fact offered a position in the University of Chicago's Department of Sociology (she declined, but clearly many card-carrying sociologists recognized the discipline's interests in her writings and work).

Public Sociology has not solved all of the issues that are part of our version of the 'crisis' in higher education. The content of what gets research and of what the findings or answers are often dictate legitimacy, support, or hostile attacks. But this has led to a flowering of ways to 'go public'. Training for dealing with media and communicating with reporters, for example. New forms of self-generated media and digital outreach is also common—in that way my graduate students and new assistant professors are way ahead of my generation in terms of getting themselves out there and 'branding' themselves in order to catch some interest.

But another response has been a network of social science scholars, initially organized by Professor Theda Skocpol at Harvard, that is called the "Scholar Strategy Network" (<https://scholars.org/>). The network has expanded among researchers throughout the country who both share

what they are doing in their work, and get connections to people who will help them communicate with policy-makers on relevant issues. It is true that the focus is on policy—and thus sociologists vary in how much their work has direct relevance. But policy is defined from the local to the national and the network has built multi-layered contacts both ranging across policy levels and across policy domains. The Network has grown to where it can now hire post-doctoral fellows and summer interns for training and research.

This is not the end-all of our institutional challenges. But we must recognize that the political right in this country has had multiple targets, from changing public narratives through media of all sorts, to groups such as the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which drafts 'model' legislation and shares it as a package to state lawmakers around the country. In effect, they use national level expertise to influence local policy by supplying pre-fab legislation. The political right has been playing the long-game, and it has done so on multiple levels of action and with multiple ways of influencing different publics. Those of us who believe in higher education—and want to preserve a critical role and a critical voice in the humanities and social sciences in the academy—need to do likewise.

#### *What we have going for us*

So, what do we have, as strengths, to deal with some of the institutional challenges laid out here? First and foremost, we have *information*—knowledge that is gained through rigorous work and mentor and peer review. Much of what we can do involves us figuring out effective ways to organize and distribute that information—but the knowledge itself is still our *raison d'être*. Second, as many have noted here in their presentations and in comments on presentations, we have our students. They are, generally, eager for such knowledge and often excited to be shown the world in ways a little different from how they assumed it was. Not all, of course, and the rise of the need for a 'credential' has done its part in making even the liberal arts a utilitarian obstacle for many students. Even so, we all have had the experience of seeing a light-bulb go on and the thrill of a new idea among students. We shouldn't overlook that (the political right even credits us with turning all our students into brainwashed Communists, so we can't be doing everything wrong . . .).

But I believe we should, in fact, think of ourselves as training students in *skills*—how to think, how to communicate, how to research something you don't know about, etc. I understand that this is a utilitarian language, emphasizing instrumentality, and perhaps more comfortable for those of us in the social sciences than for scholars in the humanities (as is, perhaps, my talk of policy-relevant research). I also recognize that there is, underlying this claim, a logic of expertise—that is, that those people trained

to do things (or know things) can then do them and know them better than those without.

Like many others, I lament the attacks on expertise coming now from the populist right. They often posit expertise as a form of elitism—that those who have learning are ‘better’ than those that don’t. Ironically, of course, we are making a different argument in higher education. We are implicitly and often explicitly claiming that everyone can develop skills and their own expertise—that we are not secretly guarding the secrets of a priesthood, but rather are committed to democratizing knowledge by teaching any and all how to acquire it.

I believe a hunger for expertise continues in American culture, despite the current wave of science denial, aggressive subjectivism (“like, that’s just your opinion, man . . .”), and culture-wars based resentment. People want to know, and they are anxious because so many of those professing knowledge make opposing claims. Our strength, I continue to believe, is to teach how to assess claims and offer our own knowledge—and how it gets made—clearly. Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump taught us the power of repetition of key ideas/concepts, particularly when connected to core values. We need to do the same—what is our central ‘takeaway,’ why we believe that to be true, and why it matters. We cannot say it enough.

Does this feel like swimming upstream? A bit, yes. Does this feel adequate as a response to the current dumpster fire that is our national politics? Not completely, no. But it is a form of resistance, and a form of mobilizing. Teaching our students is not just about presenting problems in social life and barriers to a good society. It is also helping students to see what they can do and what can be done. Showing that in history, for example, when I lay out the history of American anti-Catholicism and lay it next to contemporary Islamophobia. When we show how others live and introduce them to others’ stories. In all this we have two great allies:

1. A university tradition that is centuries old, and while it is changing, it also is resilient across cultures and centuries;

2. There is a demographic turn in the United States that President Trump, and his electoral base, and the so-called ‘alt-right’ cannot turn back. That they cannot is one reason for the violence that often springs from the right – rage at seeing what you cannot stop. If we reach the new ‘America’, with our teaching, with the opportunity for them to tell (and hear) their stories, there is support to be had. It is one important step in addressing the challenges we, and our academic homes, face.

*Concluding thoughts*

From public narratives to public policies, the professorate has tools at its disposal for responding to the current challenges and obstacles in higher education. Increasingly professionalized academic administrators are cross-pressured and are going to make decisions we don’t like. But we need to keep offering the pressures we can, backed with the skills and resources we have to bring to bear. We balance tradition and change in our scholarship; we must do it in explaining and justifying our work to any number of different audiences—from students and their families, to administrators, to legislatures, to general public opinion. Our opponents have played the long game on any number of stages, we must face the fact that we must also respond that way.

I am worried. I am often discouraged and demoralized. I am also often energized and inspired by colleagues, students, communities. I often neither dire apocalypse, nor a one-size-fits-all answer for solving our problems. But I can end as I began, seeing both the promise and the peril.

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