Proceedings: Seventh Biennial Conference on Religion and American Culture

June 2-4, 2022
The Hampton Inn &
Homewood Suites hotels
Indianapolis, Indiana

Editors

Philip Goff
Joseph L. Tucker Edmonds
Lauren Schmidt
Nate Wynne

© 2022

Table of Contents

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 the Americas in order to discuss the big questions and themes we face in our fields, classrooms, and the broader society. In 2009 we spent considerable time talking about the promises and challenges of interdisciplinary research. In 2011 we discussed 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. In 2019, we engaged teaching inside and outside of the classroom as well as reflecting on the changing nature of higher education.

This year, we spent more time explicitly discussing religious freedom and the varieties of religious practice and how they have been shaped by the pandemic and the continuing evolution of the digital age. Additionally, sessions focused on the social and political moment we are in and used this gathering to expand and extend the contexts and analyses of these ever-shifting political themes. 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 and productive and each session was informed 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 and methodological walls that have been erected when cross-disciplinary and publicly-engaged 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 Seventh Conference on Religion and American Culture was held in Indianapolis in June 2022, consisting of a series of roundtable discussions through presentations by graduate students and top scholars from a variety of perspectives. The Biennial began with a new session, an emerging scholars session that provided advanced graduate students the opportunity to present their research projects and discuss the impact of their work on the study of American religion. Nationally known scholars from different backgrounds participated in each session, including a cohort of esteemed scholars who responded to and engaged with the graduate student presenters. 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 and the graduate student presentations 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 2024.

Philip Goff and Joseph L. Tucker Edmonds
Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture

Beyond White Christian Nationalism in the United States

The influence of white Christian nationalism (WCN) on the current political and cultural moment is undeniable. Pushing beyond a discussion of association, what are the underlying individual and social mechanisms activating WCN? How might those mechanisms continue to shift? How and why is WCN influential beyond white Christian institutions and organizations? For instance, how are the political and social realities of various racial and ethnic minority groups being shaped by or reacting to WCN? What are the connections between various forms of religious nationalism abroad and WCN in the United States? What forms might WCN take in the coming 10, 20, to 50 years and how might those in the academy respond?

Gerardo Martí
Davidson College

Starting in 1515, the Dominican priest Bartolomé de Las Casas decisively turned away from an exclusive focus on scholastic interpretation of canon law to emphasize the horrific circumstances of indigenous lives, carefully documenting the catastrophic results of decades of God-sanctioned violence, justified under a nationalist ideology of ownership and world trade.[1] In doing so, Las Casas boldly confronted not only the cruelty of the Spanish conquistadors in the new world but the very paradigmatic foundation of the entire Conquest. He used evidence-based argumentation, provided concrete and indisputable details, leveraged the familiar to address the unfamiliar, and contended with competing paradigms to publicly challenge entrenched systems of economic and political power.

Today, there is a remarkable continuity between the society Las Casas confronted and the scholarship on White Christian Nationalism. Among these scholars are Perry and Whitehead[2]; Parker and Barreto[3]; McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Schrotle[4]; Maxwell and Shields[5]; Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor[6]; Robert P. Jones[7]; Ruth Braunstein[8]; and more — too many to name in this brief talk (apologies to those who are here and are not mentioned). Together — and I include myself especially with my book *American Blindspot*[9] which was published within days of the January 6th insurrection— we are working to disrupt a deeply embedded Christian nationalist orthodoxy that combines providence, prosperity, and political power.

Why Focus on White Christian Nationalism

Our scholarship seeks to reveal often unseen and obscured connections between Christian Nationalism and injustice, drawing back the curtain not as an exercise of intellect but with a hopeful ambition to promote human liberation. Why? Because any analysis of White Christian Nationalism makes explicit two things:

- *First*, the astounding concentration of economic and political power; and,
- *Second*, the forms of legitimation that buttress such domination, by which I mean the flexible apologetics that justify the inequality of so many improperly embodied selves.

Current attention to white Christian nationalism in the U.S. indicates a consensus of needing to pay attention to the religiously oriented ethnonationalism effectively unleashed especially under the Trump presidency. Of course this has a longer development.[10] The early part of the 20th century involved a forceful reaction against Socialism, communism, and radicalism. Conservative fundamentalists were wary of FDR's New Deal and came out in favor of unrestrained capitalism as the American way, embracing the emerging neoliberal order as God ordained. When World War II decimated Germany and France, American power took advantage of resources available in developing nations, like in Latin America, and leveraged white American buying power by generously supporting white home ownership and college education, resulting in tremendous prosperity that accumulated almost entirely to white elites due to immigration restrictions and a variety of explicit racial exclusions. We move through the 20th century, dubbed "the American century," accumulating wealth on one side and accumulating frustrations on the other. And much of the entrenched, mainstream religious interests leaned toward the wealth side, with social and residential segregation only accentuating misunderstanding and distrust. As we might expect, conditions changed *beyond* our borders as European nations gained their footing, as developing nations in Africa and Latin America pushed back through independence movements, and as Asian nations ramped up their economic engines posing new threats. *Within* our borders, the strains of gender and racial and sexual oppressions resulted in massive mobilization of broad social movements. The optimism of unending economic prosperity soured, and a series of demographic shifts more visible in the workplace, in the media, and in schools motivated many to harken back to a supposedly unproblematic, seemingly simpler time of rising assets and of racial harmony (ha ha).

It would be a mistake to see this as only nostalgia. Rather, Christian nationalism provides a powerful moral framework that guides ethical imperatives presumed to be necessary in a supposedly disordered society. Imperatives to protect the innocence and future prosperity of children are upfront, but look closely and you'll find the protection of asset based wealth and a profound antiblackness is behind. We are seeing in real time what happens when religion provides an ideological justification for accrued systems of power and privilege—with sacred assurances of being right, and insisting that differences are dangerous. The order and protections advocated under the framework of Christian Nationalism inevitably justifies coercion by the State, contributing to a systemic fusion of what I'm labeling at the moment as a "Christian nationalist carcerality."

Almost a century ago, Reinhold Niebuhr wrote about "Christian pessimism" that delegates the State to properly order the world, by saying, "We might come to the conclusion that Fascism is really the unfortunate fruit of Christian pessimism."[11] Similarly, Paul Ricoeur once wrote, "If [a Christian nationalist vision] were to realize itself, this unity would be a violent unity."[12] In short, unchecked Christian nationalism — a new Ethnonational order, buttressed and fueled by Religion — will lead to unobstructed violence.

Four Problems to Consider

So - How do we confront this? Whether in the U.S. or abroad, I suggest at least four problems to consider:

- 1. The Better Rules Problem: Many of us must overcome an optimism inherited from contemporary liberalism that we need better rules. The solutions to the concentration of unjust power and the attendant ideologies of legitimation must go beyond the technical enforcement of rules, since rules can be circumvented and reinterpreted, as the history of the Supreme Court in the United States makes abundantly clear.

- 2. The Villain Problem: The solution also must consist of more than revealing a villain and knocking them out, reminding me of the famous comic book cover where Captain America punches Adolf Hitler. We are not dealing with individuals but systems. The phenomenon of Donald Trump is an example of a person who is indicative of processes and principles, and these evolve and offer opportunity for improvisation. With the acceleration of digitization, media channels and feeds that cater to cliques and camps, new actors work through diffuse communities, which proffer their own competing notions of the public good.

- 3. The Sophistication Problem: Many of us want to teach our way out of this by sophisticating the thinking of the public. But the great majority of people in America and elsewhere consistently opt for simplicity, idealizing and romanticizing their own country, whether it's hard work yielding economic security or preacherly assurances that God has blessed their land (e.g., U.S. is the New Israel). Overall, we should not be surprised that such simplicity hides contradictions. In the U.S., Conservatives radically embrace the notion of property, except of course when it comes to whether a woman can have discretion over her own body. For conservatives, it's important to hold religious opinions, even when they are racist or homophobic. When conservatives say they believe in self- expression, they don't have a gay pride parade in mind.

- 4. The Identity Problem: Solutions must ultimately address the most difficult to change, the redefining of personal identity, transforming a person's sense of self and what they hold as good, right, and true. These values are not derived rationally but are affective and emotive. To many, White Christian Nationalism is comforting and inspiring. Although derived historically and dependent on social location, it is felt by people to be rooted in ontology and metaphysics. It asserts a God-ordained country that only requires properly calibrated citizens in character and temperament, believed to be best exemplified by those with nativist white roots. Evidence suggests that White Christian Nationalism has always provided a rhetorical escape from the discomforts of race and gender-based social movements. The conservative emphasis on community devolves into the conservative emphasis on "our" community. One of the more interesting in recent days as seen in the work of Sarah Riccardi-Swartz are U.S. Russian Orthodox communities[13]. Everyone else is left up to market forces, the individual alone in competition as idealized in the neoliberal imagination.

What I label here as *the Identity Problem* (see above) is particularly important because of how it helps explain the spread of Christian Nationalism in the U.S. More specifically, despite White Christian Nationalism being oriented towards whiteness and nativism, my most recent research demonstrates how the Identity Problem is manifest in people of color who themselves support this ideology of supremacy[14]. Growing evidence shows Latino Protestants increasingly aligned with White Evangelical imperatives. This surging alignment, wedded to capitalism, market society, libertarianism, and even being the "right kind of American," folds into what it means to be a "good Christian." Aspirations for wealth leads to their supporting the already wealthy. With anxieties of being capable of becoming truly American, they join in not only hearty flag waving but also restriction of immigration belonging connecting to borders, and the protection of borders leads to the protection of babies, adopting family value politics, all of which further entwine the dynamics of racism, patriarchy, governance, and wealth.

Continuing the Work of Las Casas

For the foreseeable future, Las Casas's work of discerning a Christian nationalism that rationalizes existing power structures while ignoring the suffering of others will continue, contributing a better understanding of the dynamics of white Christian nationalism and seeing the expansion of how these dynamics are working beyond those who are "white" or and even those who are "Christian."

---

[1] See Gutiérrez Gustavo, *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

[2] Whitehead, Andrew and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[3] Parker, Christopher S, and Matt A Barreto, *Change They Can't Believe in: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

[4] Mcdaniel, Eric L, Irfan Nooruddin, and Allyson F Shortle, *The Everyday Crusade: Christian Nationalism in American Politics* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[5] Maxwell, Angie, and Todd G Shields, *The Long Southern Strategy: How Chasing White Voters in the South Changed American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[6] Calhoun, Craig J, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, and Charles Taylor, *Degenerations of Democracy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2022).

[7] Jones, Robert P, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021).

[8] Braunstein, Ruth. 2021. "A Theory of Political Backlash: Assessing the Religious Right's Effects on the Religious Field." *Sociology of Religion*, November. https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srab050; Braunstein, Ruth. 2021. "The 'Right' History: Religion, Race, and Nostalgic Stories of Christian America." *Religions* 12 (2): 95. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12020095.

[9] Marti, Gerardo, *American Blindspot: Race, Class, Religion, and the Trump Presidency* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020).

[10] Among other sources, see Marti, Gerardo, *American Blindspot: Race, Class, Religion, and the Trump Presidency* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020); and Gerstle, Gary, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order: America and the World in the Free Market Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

[11] Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers,1935), 142.

[12] Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 196.

[13] Riccardi-Swartz, Sarah, *Between Heaven and Russia: Religious Conversion and Political Apostasy in Appalachia* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022).

[14] For an initial overview, see Martí, Gerardo. 2022. "Latinx Protestants and American Politics." *Sociology of Religion* 83 (1): 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srab054.

Samuel Perry
University of Oklahoma

Since around 2014, my co-authors and I have sought to spearhead the burgeoning interest in Christian nationalism as an ideology—an agenda that now spans across disciplines in social sciences and humanities. We are under no allusions that we are the first to discuss this phenomenon. Our contribution has been mainly to try and better define, quantify, and operationalize the ideology to see how it tracks with Americans' values and behaviors.[1] Yet my thoughts on where the research needs go next have been powerfully shaped by work on global populist movements. Scholars working in this area have shown that populism can be analyzed like Christian nationalism, as a political ideology, but it can be just as profitably analyzed as a discursive strategy or style in political rhetoric.[2] Even now scholars are using text-mining techniques to document that political rhetoric over time is increasingly characterized with elements of nostalgia mixed with exclusionary nationalism and authoritarianism.[3]

In this brief essay, I will share some research documenting the measurable rise of reactionary religious rhetoric as a political strategy. I will then turn to share some of my ongoing research with a team of social psychologists to elucidate why such rhetoric is more threatening than we realize.

Computational social science now shows us Former President Trump's rhetoric and those of congressional Republicans increasingly draws on religious elements and particularly those of Christian nationalism and Islamophobia. Communications scholar Ceri Hughes scraped hundreds presidential addresses from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to Trump and he quantified the frequency of both generic religious language and more specific references to Christianity.[4] First, he shows that over time there doesn't seem to be tremendous variation across political party. Even in the modern era, Reagan and Obama, for example, are virtually identical in their use of generic religious allusions and more explicitly Christian allusions. But when it comes to Trump, Hughes shows Trump's use of generic and explicitly sectarian religious language was far more frequent, nearly doubling the rate of Reagan or Obama.

And this is critical to keep in mind: Hughes's count intentionally omitted religious words referencing any other religion like Islam since presidents really did not start referencing Islam until Jimmy Carter and this would have skewed the count. In a more recent study, Hughes did a deeper dive into all of Trump's religious rhetoric including both his speeches and his Tweets.[5] And here he opens it up to include words related to Islam or Muslims. When he analyzed the words most collocated with Trump's religious rhetoric, he found such language was most often connected to the nation and patriotism. Especially "God" language in speeches, it is most often used around terms like "saluting," "flag," and "America," this would be indicative of the Christian nationalist rhetoric Trump used in public addresses.

But there is another pattern of words collocated with religious language. In this same study, Hughes lists the most collocated terms with references to Islam in Trump's speeches or Tweets and they almost always include references to "radical," "terror," or "threat." In fact, one of Trump's favorite phrases and how he most often referenced Islam was in the phrase "radical Islamic terrorism." This is one of the most unique aspects of Trump's religious rhetoric. Certainly, his use of religious language with Christian nationalist elements is far more explicit and frequent than that of previous presidents, but his blatant Islamophobia stands apart completely.

In another recent study, communications scholars Neumann and Geary analyzed all presidential invocations of Islam or Muslims in presidential speeches from FDR to Trump.[6] In their analysis they find Trump didn't necessarily discuss Islam or Muslims more than George W. Bush or Barack Obama. Given that those administrations took place in the post-9/11 era, the frequency of their references were about the same. But the context of the communication was quite different. For example, whenever Trump referenced Islam or Muslims, more than any other president he almost always did so within the context of discussing violence. But what really set him apart, even more than this, was how he discussed Islam's relationship to violence. Unlike all previous presidents who, whenever they discussed Islam and violence, were far more likely to portray Islam and Muslims as opposing violence, Trump was the only president who was more likely to portray them as enabling violence, which he did so in over 77% of his mentions.

But here is a key question: is Trump unique? Or does he signal a broader shift on the political right? In one sense, yes, Trump is unique in that most politicians are not so famously inarticulate and one-dimensional as Trump. But Twitter data suggest Trump reflects a broader trend at least in more sectarian religious language on the political right.

In a recent study by political scientists Bramlett and Burge, they scraped Twitter data for all members of Congress in 2017 and 2018.[7] And they show, first, while Democratic members of Congress make up the majority of Tweets, Republican men put out almost three quarters of the Tweets mentioning God. They also find that Republican members of Congress are more likely to Tweet terms like faith, Bible, Jesus, and Republican men are basically the only members of Congress who Tweet out Bible verses. Another interesting finding is that during the window they analyze at least, only one group seemed to increase in their religious rhetoric and that was Republican men.

So let me pause and sum up the patterns I have shared thus far: Trump clearly marks a shift in religious rhetoric, far more likely to use generic and sectarian religious terms than previous presidents, his references are

filled with "God and country" Christian nationalist language and Islamophobic elements that set him completely apart in associating Islam with violent terrorism almost exclusively. And the use of sectarian religious rhetoric on the Right, especially among Republican Congressmen is not only disproportionate to other members of Congress, it is increasing.

In light of these trends, what I am proposing in other research is a conceptual framework that helps us understand the emergence of this reactionary religious rhetoric on the right and analyze exactly what such rhetoric helps accomplish given our current political reality. I argue that current religious, racial, and political alignments require at least three distinct uses of reactionary religious rhetoric for the Right. To summarize these I use three metaphors: mating calls, dog whistles, and triggers. In the remainder of this essay, I will briefly describe the first two and give a recent example showing the third.

What do I mean by "mating calls"? If you follow the metaphor, these are simply direct statements to attract partisan support and/or attack political enemies using reactionary religious language. The underlying message that you want to convey is that Republicans (or in Trump's first campaign, at least the Republican candidate) is the party or candidate for conservative Christians. And the enemies or threats are partisan, the Congressional Democrats, Barack Obama, Hilary Clinton, Joe Biden.

In a previous era where white committed Christians were just as likely to be Democrats as Republicans, and where Republicans were made up of higher percentages of progressive mainliners and centrist Catholics, these overt statements would either make less sense or they would be too risky. Republicans would risk alienating those who are less comfortable with aligning their Christian identity to one political party. But in our contemporary context where white conservative Christians make up an increasingly disproportionate share of the Republican base, and everyone knows it, Republican leaders not only have little to lose with such overtures, they become increasingly necessary.[8]

But a more subtle use of reactionary religious language is what I will call "dog whistles." Obviously the concept of "dog whistles" is old and I am in agreement with scholars who suggest that it has lost some of its usefulness because it has too often become shorthand for any indirect or subtle or implicit language in politics. But I want to reconceptualize "dog whistles" to be truer to the original metaphor. A dog whistle is a signal that one audience will not hear, but another audience will consciously know it is being signaled. In contrast, I will reserve signals or messages that are delivered implicitly or subliminally for what I call "triggers."

Dog whistles in my reckoning are statements or messages that require ethno-cultural context, not necessarily to understand their meaning, but to properly *feel* their meaning. The intended goal in this religious language is to appeal to ethno-culture in order to make the audience feel that "our way of life" is under attack, not only by political

parties or specific leaders, but by a more vague and nebulous and shadowy enemy of ethno-cultural threats like "leftists" and "elites" and "socialists" that the Democratic party serves or partners with.[9]

Something else that is clear about dog whistle rhetoric is that it is bogeyman language, often completely untethered from reality. And it does not have to represent reality because the need is to appeal to ethno-cultural identity.

Dog whistles, then, are more indirect, even figurative, than mating calls, but more conscious than triggers. And in fact, with "triggers" I mean something more cognitive to the point of being completely unrecognized by the target audience. The audience does not realize they are being activated. The idea of a "trigger" comes from movies like *The Winter Soldier* or *The Manchurian Candidate*: someone is a sleeper agent, they hear a word or words and they are activated to carry out nefarious political goals.

Understanding how reactionary religious rhetoric works as a trigger requires us understanding that words like "Christian" somehow reference "whiteness" as well.[10] And thus the threats are non-whites, usually in the rhetorical context, the non-whites would be terrorist Muslims and criminal immigrants.

In this past portion of the essay, I will share some findings from one study in a multi-study project with a team of social psychologists. Data collection is still ongoing as we speak. We want to understand the racialization of Christian nationalist rhetoric and how it can be leveraged by politicians as a potentially unconscious "trigger." So we wanted to see whether referencing threats against "Christians" would prime Americans to believe that whites themselves are under attack.

We ran an experiment with a sub-sample of white Christians from Prime Panels. And we rotate exposure to 1 of 4 experimental conditions. Participants were either asked to read a short paragraph about prejudice against Christians, against white Americans, against Black Americans, or they were given no article to read. They were then asked a range of questions including questions about how much bias they perceived against various groups. We are interested in whether exposure to a certain experimental condition led to greater or less perception of bias against that group or another group.

The important finding is that compared to the control group, participants who read the article about anti-white prejudice were more likely to perceive bias against Christians. And the participants who read the article about anti-Christian prejudice were more likely to perceive bias against white Americans.

Stated succinctly, informing this audience about anti-*Christian* bias primed perceptions of *white* racial threat, and vice versa. Think about the implications of that. If telling an audience of white Christians that "Christians" are persecuted makes them feel that "whites" are also persecuted, then politicians and leaders on the cultural right can effectively activate or trigger *racial* threat in public

rhetoric by only referencing anti-*Christian* threats. Applying this implication helps us understand the full import of Trump's frequent claims to conservative Christian audiences that "Christianity" or "Christians" are under siege. These are racial triggers.

It also helps us understand Trump's famous Bible photo op. Readers will remember, at the height of George Floyd protests on June 1, 2020, Trump famously clears Lafayette Square, stands in front of St. Johns Church, and silently holds aloft a Bible without saying a word. What would the symbolism of holding up a Christian Bible possibly communicate at that time? Understanding that Christian language and symbolism implies whiteness for a white or a white Christian audience, holding up a Christian Bible during what they were told were racial riots implies white racial unity, and strength, and leadership. Not just religious leadership, but racial leadership.

But much more than Trump, understanding that the rhetoric of anti-Christian threats triggers perceptions of white racial threat helps put into perspective the entire culture war agenda on the right and what has become a Christian nationalism industrial complex, complete with study Bibles, video series, media organizations, and scores of books dedicated to sticking up for Christians in a society that is purportedly growing increasingly hostile to them. Scholars who are not familiar with this subculture cannot understand the depth and breadth of the "persecution" discussion that, as it turns out, may be among the key factors sustaining racial threat and resentment in this population.

Where does the research go from here?

As my collaborators and I collect more data, one need is to document the extent of reactionary religious rhetoric across a wider sample of politicians and a broader corpus of political communications. Trump has been the focus of so many analyses, and rightly so because he produced so much content, but with Big Data tools we need to quantify these patterns and see if the framework I propose for thinking about this rhetoric proves useful.

Another immediate opportunity represents the flipside of the "Christian" language trigger and that is whether invoking Islam or Muslims produces the similar response. The broader context of discourse on the political right suggests these references would already be used within the context of violence. But what happens when that context is absent? Would mere mentions of Islam or Muslims still prime religious or racial threat among white Christians or whites in general? We could easily run similar experiments to test this.

Lastly, I will mention a specific project for which data collection is already underway. I have pointed to evidence strongly suggesting religious triggers, like references to anti-Christian prejudice can increase perceptions of white racial threat among white Christians. But I want to test another specific set of outcomes. I want to see if similar religious triggers increase racial threat and then increase support for racist policies like stronger voter ID laws, voter purges, eliminating mail-in ballots, or authoritarian policing tactics or outright police brutality. These are just a few examples for future research, but the possibilities are vast.

---

[1] Samuel L. Perry, Ryon J. Cobb, Andrew L. Whitehead, and Joshua B. Grubbs, "Divided by Faith (in Christian America): Christian Nationalism, Race, and Divergent Perceptions of Racial Injustice." *Social Forces* (2022) https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soab134; Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Cross and the Flag: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022); Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[2] Noam Gidron and Bart Bonikowskim "Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda." Working Paper no. 13-0004. Cambridge, MS.: Harvard University, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs (2013).

[3] Bart Bonikowski and Oscar Stuhler, "Reclaiming the Past to Transcend the Present: Nostalgic Appeals in U.S. Presidential Elections," Working Paper (2022); Bart Bonikowski and Yueran Zhang, "Populism as Dog-Whistle Politics: Anti-Elite Discourse and Sentiments toward Minorities," Working Paper (2020).

[4] Ceri Hughes, "The God Card: Strategic Employment of Religious Language in U.S. Presidential Discourse," *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019):528-549.

[5] Ceri Hughes, "Thou Art in a Deal: The Evolution of Religious Language in the Public Communications of Donald Trump," *International Journal of Communication* 14 (2020):4825-4846.

[6] Rico Neumann and Devon Geary, "Reaching Muslims from the Bully Pulpit: Analyzing Modern Presidential Discourse on Islam and Muslims from FDR to Trump," *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019) :4107-4129.

[7] Brittany H. Bramlett and Ryan P. Burge, "God Talk in a Digital Age: How Members of Congress Use Religious Language on Twitter," *Politics and Religion* 14 (2021): 316-338.

[8] Samuel L. Perry, "American Religion in the Era of Increasing Polarization," *Annual Review of Sociology* 48 (2022) https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-031021-114239.

[9] Gorski and Perry, *The Cross and the Flag: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*.

[10] Samuel L. Perry, "Hoping for a Godly (White) Family: How Desire for Religious Heritage Affects Whites' Attitudes Toward Interracial Marriage," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53, no. 1 (2014): 202-218; Samuel L. Perry, "American Religion in the Era of Increasing Polarization." *Annual Review of Sociology* 48 (2022) https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-031021-114239; Gorski and Perry, *The Cross and the Flag: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*; Perry et al. "Divided by Faith (in Christian America): Christian Nationalism, Race, and Divergent Perceptions of Racial Injustice."

Religio-Racial Nationalisms in Global Contexts

Religio-racial nationalism—the combination of religious, racial/ethnic, and national identities—is an increasingly important topic globally. Religion, racial, and national identities coexist and can even reinforce each other. This can buttress popular religion and notions of racial superiority, empower religious organizations to influence policy, and shape the patterns of state violence. How have we seen religio-racial nationalisms play out in the past century, especially of late? What are the connections of various global religious racial nationalisms to each other and how do the ever-extending digital and social networks amplify and interpolate/alter their impact on a global stage, including in North America?

Chad Bauman
Butler University

In this paper, I address one of the discussion prompts associated with the Biennial Conference on Religion and American Culture's panel on Religio-Racial Nationalisms in Global Context: *What are the connections of various global religious racial nationalisms to each other and how do the ever-extending digital and social networks amplify and interpolate/alter their impact on a global stage, including in North America?* I do so from the perspective of my longstanding research on Hindu-Christian conflict and anti-Christian violence in India.[2] With this prompt in mind, I intend to briefly address two issues: 1) the transnational factors in the development of India's Hindu nationalism, and 2) the somewhat counterintuitive, mutual imbrication of U.S. American, Indian, and other religious nationalisms. Somewhat more indirectly, I will also consider the role played by social media in religious nationalist projects.

Transnational Factors in the Development of India's Hindu Nationalism

The central issues in Hindu-Christian conflict, or at least those that have been *constructed* as the central issues, are Christian evangelism and conversion. While many Hindus find more assertive forms of evangelism distasteful, only a smaller proportion of them would advocate legal restrictions on evangelism and conversion, and an even smaller proportion would promote or participate in acts of legal harassment or physical violence against Christians as an expression of their opposition. Those in this last category, however, are almost always associated with or inspired by Hindu nationalism, or to be more specific, the ideology of *Hindutva* or "Hinduness."

Hindutva is a political ideology that asserts the success and glory of India depend on the centrality of "Hinduism," construed less as a religion in the differentiated, post-Enlightenment Euro-American sense of the term and more as an all-encompassing cultural matrix.[2] Central to the ideology of *Hindutva,* as it pertains to religion and religious pluralism, is an understanding of religions as ethnic things without exclusive access to absolute truth, and a corresponding laissez-faire understanding of "tolerance" that considers proselytization an abrogation of the principle.[3]

The ideology of *Hindutva* coalesced in the 1920s. However, while it gained some purchase in India's independence movement, the success of more secular and pluralist political parties in the decades after independence in 1947 prevented political parties espousing it from gaining power until the late '90s. Beginning in the late 1990s, however, *Hindutva*-inspired politicians began to win more elections, briefly holding power even at the center in 1996, and then again from 1998 to 2004, before achieving two successive and decisive national victories under Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014 and 2019.

The legal and violent harassment of Christians has increased substantially in this same period, i.e., from 1998 until today, and one obvious explanation for that increase is the rise in Hindu nationalist political power at state and national levels, because *Hindutva*-inspired politicians are generally far slower to condemn and far more likely to condone or even promote or participate in acts of anti-minority harassment and violence than their more secularist competitors. There is surely some truth in this obvious explanation.

In my work, however—and here is where we get to the transnational element of religious nationalism—I have tried to account for why the Sangh Parivar, that is, the collection of political, social, religious, and cultural organizations associated with the ideology of *Hindutva,* gained more support in the 1990s after decades of quasi-irrelevance. Very generally speaking, nationalism is about insecurity in the face of perceived internal and external threats, real and imagined, and involves a dominant group's attempt to preserve its privileges. Not coincidentally, then, the revival of the Sangh Parivar in India coincides with the era of hyper-globalization, which introduced what many construed as new cultural, political, and economic threats to Indian sovereignty.

In 1991, after India's economy began to falter in the late 1980s, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was forced, in exchange for loans from the IMF, to decrease spending on social programs, eliminate certain state subsidies, liberalize trade, privatize failing public enterprises, and allow the free entry of foreign capital. Foreign investment increased exponentially, enriching the old "industrial, business, political, military, bureaucratic and religious elite in India,"[4] while impoverishing the masses. Privatization further increased economic anxiety for many by removing the possibility of employment guaranteed by nationalized industries.[5] On the cultural front, the era of hyper-globalization brought Indians into increasing contact—through travel, media, and trade—with western culture, values, entertainment, politics, and religion, all of which enjoyed the imprint of and were promoted as universally applicable and superior by globally hegemonic western European and North American governments, businesses, and institutions.

The increasing prevalence and influence of western cultural and political norms in Indian society concerned India's traditional Hindu elites for two primary reasons. First, western values, manifest in human rights talk, centered a form of egalitarianism that, if realized extensively, would have undermined the traditional political power of India's elite castes. It is no secret that these elites comprised the majority of the Sangh Parivar's earliest and strongest supporters (though the story has become somewhat more complicated in recent years). Second, prevailing post-Enlightenment western conceptions of "religion" understood it as easily separable from politics and culture, as individual

and portable, notably *not* ethnic or linked to land, as many Hindus conceive of it.[6] In addition, informed by Christianity as the dominant exemplar of "religion," western nations also came to think of religions as potential repositories of salvific truth, such that the right to convert from one to another had to be legally preserved. These western norms insisting upon the portability, individuality, and alterability of religion were therefore justifiably understood as a potential challenge to the power, in India, of traditional *Hindu* elites, both because these norms perpetuated conceptions of religion that diverged from those of most Hindus, and because they could, if they were to give rise to policies allowing unrestricted evangelism and conversion, undermine the numerical and associated political hegemony of Hindus. (The '90s were also, recall, the era of well-funded, incredibly assertive, and high-profile evangelistic initiatives like AD2000 and the Joshua Project.)[7]

I have argued elsewhere, therefore, that the rise of Hindu nationalism in India, and the increase in anti-Christian violence that accompanied it, should be seen *in part* as a kind of resistance to global flows of western culture, economics, and politics, of which Christians are presumed—in exaggerated ways but not entirely without justification—to be the primary purveyors and beneficiaries, and for which they are therefore targeted.[8] Hindu nationalism in India is therefore something of a revanchism, a selective atavism (emphasis on the *selective*) designed to preserve old hierarchies and the political status quo in the face of threats to that status quo, both internal and external. This is true not only in India, but elsewhere.[9] Ethno-religious nationalisms are connected, then, because such nationalisms in the non-western world, and perhaps even in the western world, are often, in part, an expression of resistance to the intrusion of *certain aspects of* western secular modernities perceived to be threatening to the political power of traditional elites.

The Mutual Imbrication of U.S. American, Indian, and Other Religious Nationalisms

The kind of selective and constructed traditionalism described above ("constructed" because choices must always be made about which "traditions" to preserve)[10] is of course relatively common in ethno-religious nationalisms. And this commonality is perhaps one of the keys to understanding why ethno-religious nationalists around the globe tend to admire each other. As we have learned in the last few years, and particularly since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, many conservative Christians and politicians with nationalist tendencies in the U.S. harbor a strong and abiding respect for Russia's authoritarian leader, Vladimir Putin.

On the surface, the mutual admiration of a Trump and a Putin, or a Modi and a Trump, is puzzling. Ethno-religious nationalist identities are by definition mutually exclusive, and one might logically presume that the exclusivity of such identities would make it hard for leaders who embody them to get along. But these leaders are,

counterintuitively, often quite chummy and mutual fanboys. Why?

In addition to their shared commitment to selectively "traditional" values—think for example, of evangelical Christians' admiration for Putin's aggressive legal moves to counter LGBTQ "propaganda" in Russia[11]—another important reason for the mutual respect of ethno-religious nationalist leaders is that they leave each other alone. Their ethno-religious chauvinisms may be mutually exclusive, but they share a common political grounding in early 20th-century notions of the ideal nation as an ethnically and religiously homogenous one, as a result of which they respect each other's homogenizing projects, human rights be damned.

Before becoming Prime Minister, Narendra Modi was, recall, the Chief Minister (something like a U.S. governor) of the state of Gujarat, and was accused of having turned a blind eye towards an anti-Muslim pogrom that took place there in 2002.[12] In 2005, as a result (and after the lobbying of Indian-American groups that opposed him), Modi was barred from the United States under a little known law making foreigners deemed responsible for severe violations of religious freedom ineligible for U.S. visas. Once he became Prime Minister, however, the Obama administration was more or less forced to grant him a visa.

Still, Obama periodically lectured India on its human rights violations, including after an uptick in anti-Christian attacks around Christmas, 2014, when Obama's visit to India, during which he obliquely criticized the attacks, appears to have prompted Modi to break his weeks-long silence and condemn the violence.[13] Under Trump, however, such presidential criticism came to an end, and Trump famously declared, "I love Hindu [*sic*]."[14] Readers may also recall that iconic, 2019 "Howdy Modi" rally in Houston, where Modi, with Trump in tow, declared "ab ki baar, Trump sarkar" ("next time, a Trump government") before a crowd of 50,000, which was the largest ever gathering for a foreign political leader in the U.S..[15]

We can therefore account for the mutual admiration of global ethno-religious nationalist leaders with reference to their shared, selectively "traditional" values; their common grounding in notions of the ideal, ethnically homogenous nation; and their willingness to leave each other alone to act within the confines of their own nations. Harder to explain, however, is the support of ethnic and religious minorities for such leaders.[16] And here we may profit from considering those 50,000, mostly Indian-American attendees of that Howdy Modi rally in Houston.

Ethno-religious nationalisms tend to generate xenophobia, and since xenophobic movements often target internal minorities, one would expect Indian-Americans, for example, to be wary of them in the U.S.. As Indian ex-pat Sushil Aaron has warned,[17] the same kind of politics that leads to the targeting of Muslims and Christians in India could, for example, endanger Indian and especially Indian *Hindu* Americans if white Christian nationalist politics emerged with the same force in the United States. Nationalist

xenophobia also tends to lead to more aggressive anti-immigrant policies, as it did in the Trump administration, which increased restrictions on the granting and renewing of H1-B and H-4 visas that affected Indian-Americans in particularly negative ways. And yet, here were 50,000 Indian-Americans showing up for Modi and (indirectly) Trump in Houston.

While Indian-American voters typically share some conservative social values with Republicans, they have tended to vote for Democrats. And certainly some among those 50,000 in attendance at the Howdy Modi rally probably attended more as a show of support for India than for Modi or Trump. Still, support among Indian-Americans for nationalist-leaning politicians like Trump in the U.S. has risen along with Indian-American support for nationalist-leaning politicians in India,[18] a form of what Benedict Anderson long ago deemed "long-distance nationalism."[19]

A case study may prove useful to demonstrate the increasing connectedness of these global ethno-religious nationalisms, while also indicating the role of new media in the politics surrounding them. The study will focus on a man I will call Satish. Satish is real, though I have simplified and obscured some details to make it clear that my point is not about Satish himself, but rather about the complicated political dynamics that Satish embodies. Satish was instrumental in lawsuits against the California Board of Education in 2006 and 2016 for what he and those like him considered the derogatory, inaccurate, and unfair representation of India and Hindus in California school textbooks. In their view, these textbooks were inherently biased in favor of Christianity, and therefore promoted Christian indoctrination while peddling white supremacist ideologies.

Counterintuitively, however (given his advocacy for religious minorities in the U.S.), Satish also co-organized at least one Trump rally ahead of the 2016 elections, and, during the campaign, authored an opinion piece in which he asserted that a Hillary Clinton presidency would be disastrous for India because of Clinton's alleged hostility towards India. Four years later he published a similar piece about Joe Biden. In both cases he took on Democratic politicians' tendencies to criticize India's human rights record based on what he considered biased and exaggerated reporting about anti-Muslim and anti-Christian violence there.

Meanwhile, Satish periodically has also written opinion pieces aimed at an Indian audience. In these, he regularly rails against the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) for the Commission's criticism of India's treatment of religious minorities.[20] In other articles, Satish has taken on western academics studying Indian religion and politics, often spreading demonstrably false allegations against them and their institutions in order, presumably, to generate outrage and a backlash against the work of those who might, like USCIRF, criticize Hindu nationalism and/or highlight the difficulties of religious minorities in India.

One such article about a conference on Indian religions organized in India by North American scholars went viral on Twitter and Facebook, likely an intended outcome, as a result of which an Indian politician threatened the conference with mob violence, while the President's offices of the organizers' universities began receiving phone calls from Hindus around the world, often reading somewhat blandly from a script, asking that the organizers be reprimanded or fired for their putative Hinduphobia. This particular campaign against western scholars was only one of many, and closely followed a pattern of social media usage by Hindu nationalists that has now been well-documented, including in the recent article, "Targeted Harassment of Academics by Hindutva: A Twitter Analysis of the India-U.S. Connection."[21]

So here, then, is that puzzle: How do we explain a figure who dismisses calls for the better treatment of religious minorities in India as Hinduphobic meddling, implies that non-Hindu academics have no right to conduct research on Hinduism, and generally supports Hindu nationalist politics and projects, among which are the rewriting of Indian school textbooks along majoritarian lines, who *at the very same time*, as a resident of the U.S., advocates for more Hindu-friendly and less Christo-centric textbooks but who *also,* seemingly counterintuitively, organizes political rallies for a politician (Trump) famous for Christo-centric, xenophobic, and anti-minority outbursts? Is it blatant and hypocritical self-interest? Is it the common disdain shared by Hindu and Christian nationalists for Muslims, about which I have written elsewhere,[22] and which Sitara Thobani has convincingly shown to be an animating feature of political action groups like Hindus for Trump and the Republican Hindu Coalition?[23]

I still continue to puzzle over the question. But for now, my tentative conclusion is that *Hindutva*-supporting Hindus already in America who embrace a figure like Trump do so because their desire for *Hindutva* politicians in India to be free from American human rights hectoring is stronger than their fear of suffering any meaningful personal consequences as a result of his anti-immigrant and anti-minority rhetoric and action. In a sense, this is because Hindu Americans in the U.S. feel secure enough, as largely middle- and upper-class members of a "model minority," and as adherents of a religion currently perceived as non-threatening, to privilege their Indian political interests (and probably also their domestic economic interests) over what we might call their domestic cultural interests (while still pressing those interests in the courts). But we can imagine how this calculation might be different for ethno-religious minorities with a different class profile, like Latinos, or who adhere to religions currently securitized as threatening, like Muslims.

The global interrelatedness of ethno-religious nationalisms therefore demands from scholars a form of analysis that is both transnational and intersectional. Ethno-religious nationalisms may appear, at times, to be homegrown, and certainly domestic pressures are pertinent

to their development. But so too are global flows of power, religion, politics, and money. Attention to these transnational factors helps explain, for example, how a dominant religious majority in India may still come to perceive itself as a kind of underdog on the global stage. Similarly, as implied by the previous paragraph, the intersecting elements of race, class, gender, religion, and (in India) caste must be part of any consideration of ethno-religious nationalisms, and those who participate in them. The length constraints of this paper prevented me from going beyond an analysis of race, religion, class, and caste. But it is clear enough any more thorough analysis should consider gender. In the end, then, we must resist any analyses of ethno-religious nationalisms that reduces them to a function of domestic politics or religion alone, and strive instead for more complicated, multi-layered, multi-causal, transnational and intersectional investigations of these powerful and important movements.

---

[1] See Chad Bauman, *Anti-Christian Violence in India: History, Theory, Interpretation* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2020); and Chad Bauman, *Pentecostals, Proselytization, and anti-Christian Violence in Contemporary India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[2] For a longer explanation, see Bauman, *Anti-Christian Violence in India*, 8-14.

[3] Chad Bauman, "Critiques of Christianity from Savarkar to Malhotra," in Chad Bauman and Michelle Voss Roberts, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Hindu-Christian Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

[4] Lancy Lobo, *Globalisation, Hindu Nationalism and Christians in India* (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2002), 126.

[5] Ibid., 112, 22.

[6] On the distinctiveness of this conception of religion, see the famous first chapter from Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

[7] For a longer version of this argument, see Chad Bauman, "Hindu-Christian Conflict in India: Globalization, Conversion, and the Coterminal Castes and Tribes," *Journal of Asian Studies* 72:3 (2013).

[8] See the Introduction and Conclusion of Bauman, *Anti-Christian Violence in India*.

[9] For a similar argument, see Paul Marshall, "Patterns and Purposes of Contemporary Anti-Christian Persecution," in Allen D. Hertzke and Timothy Shah, eds., *Christianity and Freedom: Contemporary Perspectives, Volume 2* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[10] See Romila Thapar, "Syndicated Hinduism," in Günther-Dietz Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke, eds., *Hinduism Reconsidered* (Delhi: Manohar, 2005).

[11] The Council for Global Equity, "The Facts on LGBT Rights in Russia," *GlobalEquality.Org* N.D. Available at http://www.globalequality.org/component/content/article/1-in-the-news/186-the-facts-on-lgbt-rights-in-russia, accessed June 30, 2022.

[12] See Ornit Shani, *Communalism, Caste, and Hindu Nationalism: The Violence in Gujarat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[13] BBC Staff, "Narendra Modi: India PM Warns against Religious Attacks," *BBC.com* 2015. Available at https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-31499978, accessed June 30, 2022.

[14] Maggie Haberman, "Donald Trump Says He's a 'Big Fan' of Hindus," *NYTimes.com* 2016. Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/16/us/politics/trump-modi-indian-americans.html, accessed June 30, 2022. For the significance, in terms of the mutual bonds of Hindu and White Christian nationalism, of Trump's loving *Hindus* rather than *Indians,* see Sitara Thobani, "Alt-Right with the Hindu-Right: Long-Distance Nationalism and the Perfection of Hindutva," *Ethnic & Racial Studies* 42, no. 5 (2019).

[15] Devesh Kapur, "The Indian Prime Mnister and Trump Addressed a Houston Rally. Who was Signaling What?" *WashingtonPost.com* 2019. Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/09/29/prime-minister-modi-india-donald-trump-addressed-huge-houston-rally-who-was-signaling-what/, accessed June 30, 2022.

[16] Interestingly, Hindu nationalist groups in India were also vocal Trump supporters, including to the point of offering prayers and engaging in other rituals in support of his hoped-for victory. See, for example, Business Today Staff, "US Election Result 202: Hindu Sena Performs 'Havan,' 'Puja' for Donald Trump's Victory," *BusinessToday.in* 2020. Available at https://www.businesstoday.in/latest/trends/story/us-election-result-2020-hindu-sena-performs-havan-puja-for-donald-trump-victory-277866-2020-11-04, accessed June 30, 2022.

[17] Sushil Aaron, "Are Indian American Supporters of Trump Ready to Embrace a Christian America?" *AmericanKahani.com,* 2020. Available at https://americankahani.com/perspectives/are-indian-american-supporters-of-trump-ready-to-embrace-a-christian-america/, accessed June 30, 2020.

[18] See, for example, Prema Kurien, "Multiculturalism, Immigrant Religion, and Diasporic Nationalism: The Development of an American Hinduism," *Social Problems* 51:3 (2004); and Thobani, "Alt-Right with the Hindu-Right." Such support was found, controversially, even on President Joe Biden's presidential campaign staff. See Aysha Khan, "Biden Faces Backlash over Staffer with Hindu Nationalist Ties," *Christian Century* 137:8 (2000). On the attempts of *Hindutva* politicians to recruit diasporic support (and funding), see Chetan Bhatt and Parita Mukta, "Hindutva Movements in the West: Mapping the Antinomies of Diaspora Nationalism," *Ethnic & Racial Studies* 23:3 (2002).

[19] Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalisms, Southesast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998).

[20] And to be fair, I have done the same in a blog for Cornell University Press: https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/the-complexity-of-anti-christian-violence-in-india/

[21] https://dgh-tweet-study.github.io/. Full disclosure: I was among the scholars who organized the conference, and could obviously for that reason provide far more information about the controversy. But again, to keep the focus on the *pattern,* rather than on this particular manifestation of it, I have intentionally withheld details.

[22] Chad Bauman, "'Americans Hate Muslims, Too' (And Other Impediments to U.S. Advocacy for Religious Freedom Abroad," *ReligionDispatches.org* (2016). Available at https://religiondispatches.org/americans-hate-muslims-too-and-other-impediments-to-u-s-advocacy-for-religious-freedom-abroad/, accessed June 30, 2020.

[23] Thobani, "Alt-Right with the Hindu-Right: Long-Distance Nationalism and the Perfection of Hindutva."

Sarah Riccardi-Swartz
Arizona State University

In April 2022, Georgia gubernatorial candidate Kandiss Taylor, who ran on a "Jesus, Guns, and Babies" platform, and who would eventually lose her bid the May primary but refused concede, held a rally in which she proclaimed, "We are the church! We run this state."[1] A few weeks later, failed 2020 GOP congressional candidate for the state of Delaware, Lauren Witzke, in an interview with *The American Journal,* part of the *Infowars* streaming family, noted that, "The Church makes up Russia. It's kinda like their state religion," before going on to proclaim that "he [meaning Putin] is the greatest ally for Christians."[2] (Witzke, by the way, worked informally for Taylor's fading campaign.) Two women: both Americans; both desiring the unification of church and state; both pledging support to different political projects to meet their ideological goals; both nationalists; both Christians.

Christian nationalism is often seen as part of the American project, linked intimately to white nationalism, racism, and history of Christian domination and American exceptionalism. The examples of this in action are endless, as Andrew Whitehead, Samuel Perry, Philip Gorski, Anthea Butler, and so many other scholars have pointed out. However, Christian nationalism is not constrained by borders or geography. In considering the global formations of religio-racial or ethnic nationalism, I want to think about the connections between white Christian nationalism in the United States and Russia. I suggest we can better understand the transformations occurring in global politics and religion by examining the networks of ideology that link Christian nationalism in the United States with current forms of Russian nationalism that we see expressed by Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church.

In February of 2022, when Vladimir Putin announced a military operation in Ukraine, he proclaimed that "Since time immemorial, the people living in the south-west of what has historically been Russian land have called themselves Russians and Orthodox Christians."[3] This comment followed the Russian president's declaration that Ukraine was not just a neighbor state, it was and is, according to him, "an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space."[4] In that one speech, Putin justified Russian nationalism and decried Ukrainian nationalism, using religious language. Religio-nationalism is a driving ideological force in Russia's justification of state violence. While Putin has already laid bare how post-Soviet Russian Nationalism is tied to ideas about Holy Rus' and the geopolitical project of *Russkii Mir,* I also see it as a form of Christian nationalism with a similar impulse towards purity, patriarchy, and propaganda that we see in the United States among white Christian nationalists.

Kristina Stoeckl, a sociologist of transnational Russian politics, argues that new types of Russian nationalism and social conservatism emerging out of the Kremlin and the leadership of the Moscow Patriarchate are just as much a product of Russian religious and ethnic heritage negotiation as they are the global culture wars discourse that has been imported to Russia from American Christian conservatives, and arguably, white Christian nationalists.[5] The question for me, as a scholar who works on American religion in global contexts, is: What do the religio-ethnic (and arguably racial) nationalisms of Taylor, Witzke, and Putin have in common? While I seek to avoid a lens of comparative religion, I also want to think about how both Christian nationalism in the United States and Russian Orthodox nationalism abroad have underlying ideological ties over church-state relations and social morals that take on anti-democratic, even authoritarian postures.

I study far-right converts to the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) in the United States. The iconic American Cold War marketing of Russia as the red menace and the United States as the salvific global figure robed nationalistic (which we can read as white Christian) pride, are inverted for the typical, contemporary far-right convert. For them, and other conservative Christians in the U.S., post-Soviet Russia has seemingly become a moral compass that points away from the late modernity of the Western world. In this way, Russia is moral entrepreneur selling social salvation to Evangelicals eager to form transnational connections, while hawking it to ROCOR converts on American soil.[6] Not all converts to Orthodox Christianity in the U.S. are far right, or "Reactive Orthodox" as I term them, but it is a growing contingent in a minority immigrant faith community, one that is, in large part connected digitally. In many respects, Reactive Orthodoxy is an anti-democratic melding of Christian nationalism, traditionalism, and Russian Orthodoxy that expresses the unfolding of and global connections to purity, nationalism, and rising authoritarianism.

Aspiring to everything modernity is not, Reactive Orthodox make use of storied thematic elements—a triptych of family, morality, and purity long associated with white Christian hegemony—to make their nationalist vision of a transnational reality. For ROCOR converts with whom I have worked, conservatism was not about Republicanism, and nationalism was removed from American exceptionalism, tethered instead to morality. Ultimately, I argue that their moral investment in Russia is really a reinvestment in the long history of purity, in its various social constructions, including racism, that is associated with deep conservatism in the U.S.. While these values of purity have long been the project of conservatives (and nationalists) in the United States—as one might easily track back to Weber—my suggestion here is that Reactive Orthodox and others are mobilizing around the issues in far more nationalistically ambiguous, globally connected ways.

In the cases I referenced above, we have two types of nationalism: one deeply connected to the history of American evangelicalism and conservative political

authority, and the other intimately linked to both prerevolutionary and post-Soviet Russian exceptionalism. At the same time, however, they are drawn together in the worldbuilding framework of ideological conviction that is mobilized, often digitally, via the globalized culture wars. Both at home and abroad, weaponized forms of religio-racial nationalism are transforming democracy and creating tense state relations globally. It is fomenting in the United States through outrage about migration, racist ideas about white decline, panic over critical race theory in K-12 schools, overturning LGBTQ+ rights, and the emergence of mainstream politicians who cling to radical, reactive, and conspiratorial ideas about how to shape society. In Russia, Kirill blamed the invasion of Ukraine on gay pride parades and a desire to save Russian-speaking Orthodox Christians from the terrors of European modernity. These types of nationalism are both undergirded by a worldbuilding project of caustic purity, bent on cleansing the social sphere from supposed immorality, difference, and diversity. Among Americans taken with Russian nationalism, praise of the state is not because of its political power but rather its moral (re)attunement.

In the forward to Sam Perry and Phil Gorski's *The Flag and the Cross*, Jemar Tisby reminds readers that white Christian nationalism encompasses "the many ways bigotry, prejudice, xenophobia, patriarchy, and racism show up in Christian guise."[7] This is part of how religio-ethnic nationalism plays out in institutional Russian religion and politics, and how it is expressed among some converts to Orthodox Christianity in the United States. Nationalism, in the convert community where I did my fieldwork, did not seem to be tied to a particular idea of Americanness or being a good American; rather, it was focused on Russian Orthodoxy and the geopolitical space of Russia by extension. As young convert monk expressed, "I feel much more spiritual kinship with Russianness than I do with Americanness." Note here how the language of religious identification is tied to nationalism. Nationalism, as Ernest Gellner reminds us, is not simply a form of patriotism. Rather, nationalism is an ideology that sees both the political and the social as congruent. As a shared cultural expression that is often expressed in micro-groups, according to Gellner, nationalism is a curatorial process through which smaller communities are sorted into the homogeneous, larger social collective.[8] In terms of religio-ethnic nationalism, what do we make of an American Christian community *that is most assuredly Christian, but feels more ideological kinship with Russia? How can we understand religio-ethnic nationalism in relationship to Americans who find spiritual and moral allies abroad to alleviate their* ideological anxieties and fulfill their theopolitical hopes of a Christian state?

As we trace out the ideological relationality of white Christian nationalism in the U.S. and religio-ethnic or racial nationalisms abroad, it could be immensely generative to think about the larger global optics and reach the Russian World, since the project itself implies expansion, domination, and empire. All these issues are part of the larger circulations of neo-colonialist power and subjugation embedded into the discourses of nationalistic worldbuilding for many nation-states and their supporters. As my time in among the group of American converts to Russian Orthodoxy came to an end in the summer of 2018, I sat on the parish lawn while fireworks filled the humid night sky. After setting off more festive explosives, the convert parish priest, an Oral Roberts graduate, said to those of us in attendance, "God bless the red, white, and blue, and by that, I mean Russia."

At first blush, it might be easy to dismiss the religio-ethnic nationalism of rural American converts to Russian Orthodoxy; after all, academe often dismisses the voices of rural Americans. Yet the stories that emerge out of this one community are not outliers. Instead, they are everyday, lived examples how nationalisms evolve, transform, network, and align with new cartographies of belief and belong. Placing these ROCOR conversions in conversation with both white Christian nationalism in the United States and the religio-ethnic nationalism of Putin's imperial *Russkii Mir* project provides us a way to see this community as part of a global turn to anti-democratic ideologies of purity and exceptionalism, rather than as just an isolated case study. These new transnational religiopolitical projects of puritanical and reactive nationalism allow us to see how moral panic pushes particular communities to embrace foreign powers, blurring the lines of citizenship and national loyalty.

---

[1] Andrew Stanton, "GOP Candidate Says 'We Are the Church and We Run the State' in Viral Video," *Newsweek*, April 10, 2022, https://www.newsweek.com/gop-candidate-says-we-are-church-we-run-state-viral-video-1696729

[2] The American Journal, "Lauren Witzke Fires Back At Disgusting NPR Anti-Christian Hit Piece," *Banned.Video*, May 18, 2022, https://battleplan.news/watch?id=628557edbfd155083bc4cb27.

[3] Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," The Kremlin, February 21, 2022, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828

[4] Ibid.

[5] Kristina Stoeckl, "The Rise of the Russian Christian Right: The Case of the World Congress of Families," *Religion, State and Society*, 48, no. 4 (2020): 222-238.

[6] Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner, *The Moralist International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars* (New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming)

[7] Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*, forward by Jemar Tisby (New York: Oxford Press, 2022).

[8] Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

John Christopher Soper
Pepperdine University

Among the most significant political developments in recent years has been the rise of religious nationalism in places as diverse as the United States, Poland, Russia, India, Israel, Turkey, and Myanmar, to name a few. As those disparate cases suggest, religious nationalism is a global phenomenon and a cross-religious one as Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists have in different contexts asserted a close fusion of religion and nation.[1]

Ideologically, religious nationalism is the fusion of national identity with that of a single religious tradition. A 2017 Pew Survey, for example, found that more than three-quarters of Greek respondents (76 percent) said that it was important or very important to be Greek Orthodox in order truly to be a national in their country, while nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of the Polish respondents in the same survey indicated the same link between Roman Catholicism and Polish national identity.[2] In both places, in short, religious and national identity are conflated in the minds of a significant portion of the population.

Religious nationalism is most likely to be constructed in places where a critical mass of the population identifies with one religion. Historically, many European states reflected this model as state churches reproduced the religious culture that developed along the confessional lines brought on by the Protestant Reformation. This does not mean, however, that a mono-religious culture is a sufficient condition for religious nationalism. The modern Turkish state promoted a secular-nationalist vision in the early 20th century although the overwhelming percentage of the nation adhered to Sunni Islam.

The spread of democracy abetted the rise of religious nationalism in various parts of the world. Democratization encouraged participation in relatively free and fair elections and opened space for political activism. Freed from the constraints of authoritarian regimes, political actors sought electoral support. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, the Law and Justice Party in Poland, and the Justice and Development Party in Turkey all found electoral success by mobilizing voters along religious lines. The political entrepreneurs who led these parties did not manufacture religious divisions in their respective nations, but they weaponized them. Thus, democratization incentivized political leaders to identify and define certain characteristics as socially relevant, and in places that were highly religious, religion proved immensely attractive for political ends. The political success of these nationalist movements, in turn, forces secular parties to appeal to religious voters, thereby accelerating the rise of religious nationalism. Even the historically secular, multi-faith Congress Party in India has discovered that it too has to appeal to Hindu voters as Hindus in order to compete with the more avowedly Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party.

But a religious market by itself is not always sufficient for religious nationalist movements. Equally important is the historical role of religion in nation-state formation and of their respective nationalisms.[3] Religious nationalism develops in places where religion played a positive role in national history and its myth making. In Greece, Poland, and Iran, Greek Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Islam, respectively, stood for the nation over against the foreign domination represented by the Ottoman Empire, the Soviet Union, and neo-colonialism, respectively. This historical defense of the nation by religious authorities bonded together national and religious identities. And this narrative of a close alignment of religion and nation is reinforced through the educational system, political rhetoric, and formal institutional links. It is no accident that more than half of Greece's national public holidays are Orthodox religious holy days; nor is it surprising to discover that Greek political leaders, even those who are not particularly religious, find themselves at Orthodox services on those high holy days.

Where this historical narrative is absent, on the other hand, nationalist movements largely jettison any link to religion. The Catholic Church in Italy and France, for example, opposed the nationalist projects of the 18th and 19th centuries. Thus, contemporary nationalist movements in those countries make few explicit connections to religion. In Italy, ethno-nationalist parties like the Northern League and the Five Star Movement frequently demonize Muslims and the European Union, but they do not imagine that making Italy great again has anything to do with a resuscitation of the Catholic Church.

The final factor helping to explain the rise of religious nationalism is the failure of secular alternatives to it. The nationalism of postcolonial leaders in Iran, India, and Turkey was secular, at times aggressively so, but their subordination of religion proved to be short-lived. For many people in those places, the modernizing, secular state which privatized religion, had little purchase because religion provided a stronger basis for self-identification than did secular values. The result was the rise of a religious nationalism in much of the developing world that hewed much more closely to the spiritual, cultural, and historical allegiances of the masses.[4] A similar dynamic occurred in Eastern Europe with the demise of the Soviet Union, the discrediting of communism as a unifying ideology, and the re-emergence of religious nationalism to fill the political and ideological void. As different as they were in their political agendas, the Iranian Revolution, the Solidarity Movement in Poland, and the BJP party in India all used religion as a mobilizing force against secular states.

It is tempting to conclude that religious nationalism, even nationalism itself, is deeply problematic for its capacity to define some groups as valued and others as not. Religiously based violence in India, the suppression of rights

for religious minorities in Russia, and the conflation of Christian and American identity are all too real reminders of this danger. However, a people need narratives of meaning that give shape and direction to the collective yearnings of a nation and its people.[5] As Joan Didion famously wrote, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live.*"* There is no escaping the telling of stories of who we are as a people. The question is what are those stories going to be and what role will religion play in them?

The Indian philosopher Ashis Nandy once quipped that "the opposite of religious and ethnic intolerance is not secularism, but religious and ethnic tolerance."[6] In places where religious nationalism is ascendant, the task is to mine the rich stories of a nation's history and its religious traditions that positively affirm religious and political tolerance. The alternative to Jewish nationalism in Israel is closer attention to the country's founders who saw democratic values as a core part of the Jewish experience. In India, Gandhi's commitment to religious tolerance and a multi-faith country came from his Hinduism, not in spite of it. At its best, America's civil religious tradition unites people of divergent religious traditions into a shared set of political commitments and values.[7] Rather than ceding the ground to religious nationalists who weaponize religious and national identity for political purposes and often with terrifying consequences, it is time to tell better stories.

---

[1] J. Christopher Soper and Joel S. Fetzer. *Religion and Nationalism in Global Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[2] Pew Research Center. "Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe." http://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/ (accessed on May 10, 2022).

[3] Anna Gryzymata-Busse, *Nations Under God: How Churches Use Moral Authority to Influence Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[4] Mark Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, from Christian Militants to Al Qaeda* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

[5] Rogers Smith, *That is Not Who We Are!: Populism and Peoplehood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

[6] Ashis Nandy, "The Twilight of Certitudes: Secularism, Hindu Nationalism and other Masks of Deculturation." *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1998): 283-298.

[7] Philip S. Gorski, *American Covenant*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

Refugees and New Immigrants in the United States

In current discourse, migration is largely framed along the lines of economic mobility and people "choosing" to migrate, while being a refugee is characterized by "displacement" and described through a humanitarian lens. For immigrants, religion is identified as a "connection" that keeps immigrants connected to their home culture as they adapt to a new country. For refugees, however, religion is largely described as an "assistance," with religious organizations helping refugees resettle and adapt to a new country. In this session we want to think about the role of religion through the lenses of belonging and formation. How does religion provide language and discourse for refugees and immigrants to create narratives and values in relatively new settings? How does their religious formation provide them spaces, often across nationality and language, to think about their relationship to other political, environmental, and cultural forces? Given the unprecedented and complicated intersectional changes impacting migrant and refugee populations, how can we re-think the relationship of religion and social solidarity? Moreover, what aspect of religious experience should we explore and center when foregrounding the everyday lives of communities shaped by migration and displacement?

Melissa Borja
University of Michigan

As we embark on this discussion about religion and migration, I'd like to make a public confession. (This is, after all, a gathering of religion scholars, and we're familiar with acts of confession!) Here I go: I am a religion scholar, yes, but I am first and foremost a historian of immigration. This scholarly orientation matters because my grounding in the study of migration fundamentally shapes how I approach the study of religion. In my work, I consider religious change as a form of migration.

The connection between religion and migration is something that became clear to me in my two decades of research on the religious lives of Hmong refugees. Hmong people have often spoken of their trans-Pacific crossing in relation to religious and spiritual crossing. These conversion narratives, so enmeshed in their experience of exodus, call attention to the intertwining of religion and migration. The case of Hmong refugees and religious change reveals two ideas: first, that a religious experience can be understood as a form of migration; and, second, that migration can be understood as a religious experience, with outwardly non-religious migration policies nonetheless producing profound religious transformations.

Religion has long been recognized as vital to migrants as they undertake the challenge of creating new homes and new lives in new countries. Providing what Shari Rabin described as "mobile resources for living," religion helps migrants to survive, offering them a critical source of comfort, community support, and cultural continuity.[1] Religion allows migrants to feel connected to home but also creates a space where migrants create new American versions of themselves and participate in American civic life. And while religion provides a sense of stability, it is anything but static. Like migrants themselves, religious beliefs, practices, and institutions change over time and as they are adapted to new settings.

Scholars have even gone so far to use religion and migration as interpretive lenses for the other. Robert Orsi wrote that migration is "a spiritual event," one in which "the outward journeying was matched by a changing inner terrain."[2] On the flip side, Thomas Tweed analyzed religion through the metaphor of migration and argued that religion is fundamentally defined by the experience of "crossing and dwelling."[3]

In my book, I illuminate the importance of religion in the lives of one particular group of migrants—specifically, refugees. Social scientists have written about many aspects of Southeast Asian refugees' adjustment to American life, from employment and language acquisition to health and political engagement. The development of the field of critical refugee studies has introduced new themes, calling attention to how empire, nation, and race have shaped not only refugee policies but also the cultural and political construction of the idea of the refugee. In this scholarly literature, the importance of religion in the lives of refugees has received comparatively less attention. But Hmong refugees also had religious and spiritual needs, and they often turned to cherished rituals and beliefs when war, forced migration, and resettlement threw their lives into disarray. These traditions offered Hmong refugees a set of spiritual resources that enabled their survival in the present, connection to the past, and hope for the future. Centering religion in refugee stories not only changes how we view refugee migrations but how we understand refugees themselves.

The experiences of refugees also illuminate the importance of migration in the lives of religious people, whose beliefs and practices were shaped by state migration policies. As I show in my book, American refugee resettlement—both refugees' experiences of refugee migration and the government policies that directed it—initiated important changes in belief, ritual, identity, and community. Historians of American immigration have long been attentive to the significance of religion in shaping public attitudes about migration and aiding migrants' adjustment to life in the United States, though they have rarely considered how the laws and policies that manage migration might impact the religious beliefs and practices of migrants. And yet this is what happened for the Hmong. American refugee policies hindered the practice of traditional Hmong rituals at the same time they established close relationships between Hmong refugees and Christian church volunteers, who introduced them to new religious beliefs and practices. American refugee policies thus set in motion a variety of changes, one of which was the decision by many Hmong refugees to convert to Christianity.

Religious conversion, I argue, is usefully understood not merely as a product of a migration experience, but as a form of migration experience. Migration is a choice that people make carefully and strategically, both as individuals and as families, and in response to changing circumstances, practical needs, and material conditions. Migration involves both change and continuity: migrants do not simply assimilate, but retain aspects of their native culture at the same time that they adapt to a new one. Finally, migration is a complex transnational phenomenon, and migrants typically lead lives that span national boundaries. Even though they live in one country, they often maintain familial, social, cultural, economic, and political ties to another country. They sometimes pursue multiple migrations throughout the course of their lives. They might move from one country to a second country, and then to a third. They might return to their home country later in life, or migrate back and forth regularly, or live in a borderland area where the distinctions between one nation and another are blurred.

Listening closely to Hmong stories makes clear that their conversion experiences shared much in common with migration. Conversion is often idealized as a neat, one-way journey, with full assimilation as the objective. In real life, though, conversion is far more complicated, much like the transnational lives of migrants. For Hmong people, conversion was a spiritual migration that people often pursued strategically and on their own terms, at times with ambivalence and sometimes with felt coercion. It was a decision shaped by the needs of their family and community, the power of the state, and the material conditions of their lives as refugees. Like migration, conversion was often multidirectional and involved several religious changes. Rather than being a one-time choice, conversion often involved a series of choices, and people sometimes pursued multiple conversions in the span of their lifetimes. Finally, like migration, conversion did not involve a clean break with past people, places, and practices. Rather, Hmong experiences reveal how religious conversion involved complex crossings and recrossing and dwelling in religious borderlands, with converts making spiritual lives for themselves in the space *between* two worlds. If transnational migrants practiced what Aihwa Ong described as "flexible citizenship," religious converts often practiced flexible religious belonging.[4]

As these examples show, religion shapes the lives of migrants. Migration also shapes American religion. I want to conclude my comments with a big picture question about interpretive frameworks. How might immigration studies inform religious studies? As a provocation to initiate our conversation this afternoon, I'd like to identify a few specific themes that are useful in immigration studies could also be useful in religious studies:

- The power of the **state** and the different regimes of regulation and governance
- The significance of **relationships** and the impact of family strategies, social networks, and chain migration
- The importance of **fluid belonging** and the reality of transnationalism and "flexible citizenship"

---

[1] Shari Rabin, *Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 7.

[2] Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 150.

[3] Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[4] Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1999).

William A. Calvo-Quirós
University of Michigan

On the morning of March 29, 2009, the Mexican Army stationed along the U.S.–Mexico border adopted an "unusual" new approach to their anti-drug war: a series of ambushes that took place simultaneously in the cities of Nuevo Laredo, Tijuana, Tamaulipas, Mexicali, and the Ciudad de México. This surprise attack was a response to a series of recent bloody encounters between local authorities and the U.S.–Mexico drug cartels. The military operation had specific targets; the soldiers did not raid clandestine marijuana plantations, drug laboratories, or the homes of prominent drug dealers. Instead, they destroyed around thirty *capillas* (chapels), and *altares* (altars) erected to Jesús Malverde and La Santa Muerte (Holy Death), two popular saints along the border.

The Mexican government justified these actions by arguing that the worship of these two "saints" was directly related to drug smuggling, human trafficking, and other illicit activities in the region. The direct attack on these "narco-saints" was meant to weaken the cartels' influence in the area, at least spiritually. They were not successful. Indeed, on the contrary, the government's approach has increased drug-related violence, police corruption, fear of the government, and poverty in these towns. Moreover, the veneration of saints such as Jesús Malverde and La Santa Muerte has become more popular than ever in Mexico and the United States. My forthcoming book, *Undocumented Saints: The Politics of Migrating Devotions* (Oxford University Press) studies the migration of faith and religious practices between these two countries and the politics of control and surveillance around the spiritual. As we see, the boundaries between nation-state sovereignty and the public displays of religious practices are not always clear-cut. States, as in the case of Mexico, consistently try to enact their power over the terrains of the spiritual. Migrant, nonnormative faith practices are intensely monitored and surveilled. They are subject to state-sanctioned organized control and violence by both the United States and Mexico because they pose a threat to the imaginary notions of each as a cohesive state faith-nation as Christian, despite their assertions of constitutional secularism. Far from exotic, random, or naïve cultural artifacts, popular saints, such as La Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde, are sophisticated social constructions. Such constructions are assembled (and adapted) across sociopolitical contexts, with the transformative potential for defiance and social change. In many ways, here in the middle spiritual space or the border exists an amalgam of spiritual innovations that cannot be identified as fully or only Mexican. Still, neither are they mainstream Anglo-American, despite the symbiotic interweaving of both.

On June 28, 2011, María Medina-Copete was a passenger in a borrowed truck, driving along interstate I-40 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, when Sergeant Arsenio Chávez of the state police stopped the vehicle for "inadequate driving distance."[1] This routine traffic stop soon turned into a complex and serious First Amendment court case, with broader implications regarding the relationship between the state and faith, and whether a person's spiritual affiliations (and veneration practices) can be used as evidence of criminal activity by the U.S. judicial system. Per the declarations of Chávez, the officer performing the traffic stop, he first suspected the individuals in the car were involved in illegal drug activities when, in addition to being nervous, Medina-Copete began reciting a prayer to LSM.

Upon searching the car, Chávez found two pounds of methamphetamine hidden in a secret compartment. The driver and her companion denied any knowledge of the drugs and stated that the car was borrowed from a friend. The state prosecutors used the driver apparent veneration of LSM as evidence against them. The saintly figure, the state argued, "relate[s] solely to the tools of the drug traffickers' trade" and is, in fact, one of the "means for the distribution of illegal drugs" and its commercialization.[2] By invoking LSM, prosecutors argued, both defendants revealed not only that they were aware of the drugs inside the car but also that they were purposefully transporting them across state lines. As the Goxon-Chagal and Medina-Copete case illustrates, the study of LSM cannot be disassociated from the study of social perceptions and assumptions about race, class, citizenship, and language, and of how these factors shape the characterization of spiritual practices and religious iconographies.

A prayer:
[God,] at this moment I am at the border, determined to go through. I know it is against the law. But you know well that I do not do it to defy the regulations of a nation. The economic reality in which I find myself and the desperate search for a better future for my family make me cross over without the necessary documents. I feel like [I am] a citizen of the world and a member of a Church that has no borders.

>   —Diócesis de San Juan de los Lagos, "Al cruzar sin documentos"

"Al cruzar sin documentos" (On Traveling Without Documents) is one of many prayers in *El devocionario del migrante*, a pocket-sized prayer book created in 2007 by the Diocese of San Juan de los Lagos in Jalisco, Mexico, for those leaving Mexico and migrating to El Norte (the United States and Canada). The devotional book is structured to follow the emotional and ever-unfolding drama experienced by migrants during their journey, including racism, cultural rejection, isolation, and family separation, all in the potential contexts of labor precariousness, imprisonment, and deportation. Other prayers include "When Leaving My Family behind at Home," "On the Journey North," "When

Crossing [the Border] Without Documents," "When Looking for Work," "For Moments of Confusion," "When Losing Your Job," and "When Imprisoned or Deported." The prayers not only invoke the struggles unique to each stage of the immigration process but also engage with political, economic, and moral issues ranging from the implications of crossing the border and working without authorization to the Catholic Church's transnational status and the Mexican Church's evolving stand on migration.

The prayers in *El devocionario* include self-reflective dialogues between the migrant and God, but also between the migrant and nation-states, the International Monetary Fund, and their families and other migrants. As the book explains, the prayers are meant to help the individual "overcome all the difficulties of the journey" and to "come to positive fruition." These prayers lay out the many difficulties of an agonizing journey—almost a spiritual pilgrimage—to El Norte, and the social and moral expectations that migrants' home communities and the Church hold for them. As modern versions of the Stations of the Cross, these prayers illustrate the stages of a pain inflicted on a body, in this case the social bodies of migrants. Simultaneously, these prayers, from an official diocesan prayer book, make evident that the Church is invested not only in protecting the souls of migrants but also in reinforcing fixed codes of social conduct.

El devocionario is, therefore, much more than a prayer book. It is a booklet of moral norms and practices and attempts to construct an ideal immigrant and good Catholic social citizen. The moral codes are embedded in the self-reflective prayers, which ask the immigrant to identify with the implied ideal subject—one who is confronted by a dangerous, hostile world that is different from the one in Mexico. In this situation, the practice of maintaining core Mexican Catholic values becomes not only an objective but a method that helps the migrant remain both holy and whole as a Mexican in exile. As *El devocionario* illustrates, the Catholic Church in Mexico is an active player in the discursive construction of how immigrants may read their experiences of displacement. At the same time, it shows how faith and everyday religiosity merge and work to perpetuate nationalism and moral discourses about citizenship, gender performance, labor, nationhood, and even salvation.

As immigration debates rage in the United States and all industrialized nations in the world, most have focused on issues of citizenship, labor, and national security. Yet what is happening in the terrains of the spiritual—as religious practices travel, change, and adapt—is equally important and urgent. It is in this context that *studying what is happening on the terrains of* popular religiosity within migrants' communities and the "borders" between nations (real and imaginary), and in particular the emergence and migration of vernacular practices, is central to the discursion transforming the world today. The study of religions can help us move away from the narrow and reduced misconception of immigrants are not spiritual "deviant" or mere "passive" victims but can help us to see them as rather

active everyday intellectuals who are constantly trying to make sense of their experiences of oppression and exploitation via the spiritual.

In this sense, it is crucial to refute the misconception that oppressed communities have a limited understanding of what is happening or worse, that they do not know what is going on around them. On the contrary, the critical analysis of the trans-national mobilization of religious practices demonstrates, as Emma Perez[3] has suggested, how border communities not only comprehend their oppressive realities and the absurdity of their subjugated positions, but they actively engage with the imaginary and the religious to challenge and expose oppression, retain a collective memory, and navigate power—for example, as is seen in the emergence of folk saints who respond to men's sexual violence and harassment of women along the border. In this sense, the study of migrant religious practices can help us critically analyze how power and politics of control are unacted within migrant communities and can help us to contextualize the imaginary, the spiritual, and the religious remain as useful instruments for emancipation, dignity, and keeping the joy of living in these communities under siege. Migration alters the spiritual experience of migrants, but religions also alter the experience of migration.

In many ways, migration represents not only the mobilization of people but also a massive relocation of religious practices in all directions. In the early 20th century on the East-West routes and now more on the South to North tracks. Some of our pioneer religious scholars have laid down the groundwork in our field. However, the magnitude of people moving, and the characteristic of today's hyper-connectivity are creating new religious re-territoria-lizations. To address this phenomenon, I introduce the term "religious intrastates," which describes the mobile geographic, cultural, and political border zones created by spiritual and religious migration. The religious intrastates I study are cultural and religious territories that transcend official national boundaries—places (both real and imaginary) where the sacred and the spiritual bind together seemingly disparate cultural, and sovereignty territories. They are deeply cultural, religious, and political all at once, as are the devotional practices, service modalities, and vernacular piety they spawn.

Religious intrastates reveal the limits of sovereignty (and nation-state projects), showing that national boundaries are porous and deeply insufficient to contain the flow of religious experience. I study how Mexican migrants construct the religious intrastate within the United States when they bring their beliefs and practices with them. They do likewise within Mexico itself, both when they physically return homes from the United States and when they send money home via remittances, fulfill mandas or ex-voto, sponsor religious festivities, or reshape local beliefs because they experience in the United States, which I see as processes of religious retorno or return. Migrant religious events such as the annual balls to celebrate La Santa Muerte in Queens, New York, or the festivities that draw more than

three thousand followers to honor Saint Toribio Romo in Tulsa, Oklahoma, do more than just venerate a vernacular saint: they actively reconstruct a Mexico-in-simulacra that is held together by prayer recitations, music, decorations, performances, food, and invocations to an almighty God to look after a community of religious exiles.

As Anzaldúa has described it, the U.S.-Mexico border is "*una herida abierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms, it hemorrhages again."[4] We can thus read the border as a seam of long-lasting stigmata—constantly bleeding wounds generated by the legacies of colonial violence and greed as they are inflicted on the space and on those who carry the border within them—or as a site of constant social, epistemic, economic, and religious crucifixion. But (like the crucifixion itself), the border is also a place of rebirth, regeneration, and resurrection. Certainly, a new America is in the works, and religious spaces show us the tensions and possibilities that are emerging today.

As a religious scholar of migration, and the migration of religious practices, it looks like we are experiencing, a process I called the "Gerrymandering of Freedom" where freedom is getting re-districted and re-mapped. Freedom has become a discourse of privilege (and exile) to which not all are equally entitled to enjoy. What is "religious freedom" when you are not free to exist as fully human within the state? How does the state control the religious practices of migrants? How are state "imaginaries" of unity and cohesion tied to (or defined by) the discourses of religion? For me, the discourses about spirituality and religiosity are epistemic discourses about power. For many migrants, the spiritual is 'always' political because it deals with the maneuvers of transnational power that define the precarious life (and death) of people. It is about their need for the spiritual to imagine and enact a different world for them and their families, for their hope of a future on earth as it is in Heaven.

[4] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 1987) 65.

---

[1] United States v. Maria Vianey Medina-Copete and Rafael Goxcon-Chagal, 757 F. 3d 1092 at 3 (10th Cir. 2014); Clarence Walker, "Praying to a Saint Is Evidence You're a Criminal? That's the Insanity of the Drug War for You," *Alternet*, July 22, 2015, https://www.alternet.org/drugs/santa-muerte-goes-court-curious-case-narco-saint-prayer.

[2] Medina-Copete *and Goxcon-Chagal,* 757 F at 16–17.

[3] Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

Shari Rabin
Oberlin College

Jews have been coming to what would become the United States continuously since the seventeenth century, from Europe; from North Africa and Asia; and from South America and the Caribbean. They have been variably cast as refugees and immigrants, but they have always received forms of assistance from other Jews and with the recent exception of Israeli migrants, they have always come from places where they were in a—usually politically disadvantaged—minority.

Jews can provide useful fodder for thinking about how immigrants do and do not fit into the historiography of American religion and about the utility and politics of the category of "immigrant religion." For the rest of my time, though, I want to think about the theme of "belonging" alongside two historical subjects from my current work, a history of Jews in the American South that participates in a broader project of unpacking religious diversity in unexpected places.[1]

The first is a man named Alexander Gurwitz, who immigrated with his family from southeastern Ukraine to San Antonio in 1910. In the mid-1930s he authored a Yiddish-language memoir, which has been translated and published, with an introduction by Bryan Edward Stone under the title *Memories of Two Generations*.[2] The second is Elizabeth Rubinowitz, who was interviewed in 1939 by Chlotilde R. Martin for the southern life histories program of the Federal Writers Project. Rubinowitz was born in Vilnius and emigrated in 1892, to Newark, to New York, and finally to Beaufort, South Carolina.[3]

Both Gurwitz and Rubinowitz were forced to reconsider Jewish conceptions of difference within the religious and racial topography of the American South. One of the most striking moments in Gurwitz's memoir is when he describes his short-lived career as a peddler: "it was hardly fitting for a Jew like myself, a Torah-learned Jew…to go knocking on Mexican doors." Gurwitz—who ended up working as a religious functionary—maps a Jewish social hierarchy onto an American one. At the same time, in other parts of the memoir, he admits to his own reduced status by way of ironic biblical exegesis. He contrasts the biblical Joseph, who "rode in princely chariots with purebred horses," to his own wagon, "hitched to a skinny, bony horse, with absolutely no fanfare."[4]

Rubinowitz's workplace was a store, in which racial, class, and linguistic norms were regularly upended. Martin describes the store as a place of social mixing where, "you are likely to find yourself sandwiched in between your colored washer-woman and the town's society leader." Rubinowitz and her husband could be heard "shouting [commands and curses] at each other across the amused heads of their customers" in both English and in Yiddish; her husband sat by the door reading a newspaper "printed in some foreign language." At the same time, Rubinowitz imbibed southern racial hierarchies. She told Martin that despite her incessant work, she paid a Black woman to do her laundry, and she admitted to suspecting Black customers of stealing. When asked about her son's marriage to a (presumably white) non-Jew, she told Martin "What's religion? If they love each other - why not? Besides, he doesn't go to church and neither does she, so they get along fine."[5] She theorized religious boundaries as dissolvable by distance from spaces of worship.

We might be tempted to describe Gurwitz as religious and Rubinowitz as not. While Gurwitz—who emigrated as a middle-aged man - insisted "it was the will of God that we should come to America" and lamented the absence of daily worship in San Antonio, Rubinowitz—who arrived in the U.S. as a young girl - described her emigration as an economic necessity and regularly worked on Saturdays. According to Martin: "she makes no claim to any strong religious feeling…[and] goes to the synagogue only once or twice a year." Nevertheless, both explicitly identified as "Orthodox Jews," which Gurwitz contrasted to "*Yahudim* (German, Reform Jews)."[6] "Orthodox Jew," then, functioned not only as a religious identity but as a marker of language and geography, encompassing the Yiddish language and complicated relationships to both Eastern Europe and Palestine - Gurwitz was an ardent Zionist and Rubinowitz's husband had emigrated to Palestine.

These ties were not easily captured through Martin's limited metric of "religious feeling" and yet they were central to how both immigrants—relocated from Eastern Europe to obscure corners of the American South—situated themselves in space and time and relative to other human beings.[7]

We learn about these immigrants through very different media, which point to two issues I want to briefly touch on: memory and the state. Libby Garland has described the "narrative of the good immigrants," which erased a history of clandestine Jewish immigration after 1924 and kept many Jews from solidarity with other immigrant groups.[8] Rachel Gross has shown how this kind of narrative became the center of a nostalgic religious sensibility for contemporary American Jews.[9] Already in the 1930s, however, within an Americanizing Jewish community closely watching the rise of Hitler, Gurwitz crafted his own memory, in Yiddish, in which God and Torah were central and American immigration policies lamented.

Rubinowitz, on the other hand, spoke in a nonnative language to a white Christian representing the U.S. state. She was likely selective about what she shared with her interlocutor, whose accounts of Jewish difference were often objectifying—she described Rubinowitz's husband as her "little dark, chunky, greasy-faced, spectacled mate." Jews were in many ways able to maintain privacy from the gaze of the U.S. state and yet they remained visible in this New Deal project and elsewhere. For instance, in the 1920 census,

both Gurwitz and Rabinowitz are listed as native speakers of "Hebrew," which had at one point been considered for inclusion on the census as a racial categorization. Rubinowitz's son changed his last name to Robinson, which, as Kirsten Fermaglich has shown, was a common Jewish strategy, not of assimilation per se, but of religious privatization.[10]

      Although most of the people I write about are immigrants, I generally haven't thought about my work in terms of immigrant religion per se. This is likely because American Jewish history is so centrally concerned were immigration (and less so with religion). But I think it is also because to my mind, what is true of immigrant religion is true of American religion writ large: it involves people negotiating various experiences and understandings of human difference; it is formulated in spaces of everyday life, including workplaces; it is locally situated but linked to global imaginaries and connections; and it is hard to disentangle from the dual imperatives of collective memory and state power.

---

[1] Kristy Nabhan-Warren, *Meatpacking America: How Migration, Work, and Faith Unite and Divide the Heartland* (University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Edward E. Curtis IV, *Muslims of the Heartland: How Syrian Immigrants Made a Home in the American Midwest* (New York University Press, 2022); Uzma Quaraishi, *Redefining the Immigrant South: Indian and Pakistani Immigration to Houston During the Cold War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

[2] Bryan Edward Stone, ed. *Memories of Two Generations: A Yiddish Life in Russia and Texas* (University of Alabama Press, 2016).

[3] Chlotilde R. Martin, "The Levines in the Melting Pot" in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

[4] Stone, ed., 303, 23.

[5] Martin, 11, 9.

[6] Stone, ed., 312, 297; Martin, 9.

[7] Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

[8] Libby Garland, "Not-quite-closed Gates: Jewish Alien Smuggling in the Post-Quota Years," *American Jewish History* Vol. 94, No. 3 (September 2008), 222-224.

[9] Rachel B. Gross, *Beyond the Synagogue: Jewish Nostalgia as Religious Practice* (New York University Press, 2021).

[10] Martin, 3; Ancestry.com. *1920 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010; Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 96; Kirsten Fermaglich, *A Rosenberg by Any Other Name: A History of Jewish Name-Changing in America* (New York University Press, 2018).

Resonance and the Good Life

The sociologist Hartmut Rosa has posited that social scientists have, somewhat curiously, often demurred from considering what makes for a good life; his project, meanwhile, is to investigate social structures that provide a greater likelihood that contemporary citizens of these structures might experience "resonance" in alignment with life's rhythms. This provocation from Rosa provides the framework for this session, in which we will consider different angles on persistent questions in contemporary religious studies under the rubrics of "resonance" and "the good life." What are the various modes and structures of "belonging" in contemporary society that foster resonance and diminish/mitigate alienation? From where do these structures derive their coherence and efficacy? Is resonance cognate with spirituality? Can such contemporary important phenomena as gaming, physical fitness clubs, new religious movements, etc. be profitably theorized as modes of resonance seeking, and if so, then what might this mean for how we speak of "religion?" In what ways might such a framework produce fresh insight on contemporary modalities of belonging, identify formation, and social efficacy?

Gregory Price Grieve
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

In his book *Resonance: A Sociology of our Relationship to the World*, the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa argues that contemporary life is exponentially speeding up, and even if this creates more resources, it leads to less happiness. If acceleration is the problem, the solution for Rosa lies in "resonance," which he describes as "*not an emotional state, but a mode of relation . . . .* which can be understood as a three-note chord consisting of momentarily converging movements of body, mind and tangible world." Rosa argues that digital screens block this resonating relationship because they bottleneck our experience of the world, and our sensorium is greatly reduced. In my talk today, I question his reductionist understanding of new media, and I want to extend Rosa's understanding of resonance into digital media to explore how friendship works in cooperative videogaming, and how this it can operate as model for the good life in our hypermediated age of social media and social isolation caused by the pandemic.

Loneliness seems baked into the very fabric of our current hypermediated age. However, where does it come from? At the end of her magnum opus, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt describes the heart of political oppression as "organized loneliness." As she writes: "Its danger threatens to ravage the world as we know it — a world which everywhere seems to have come to an end." One may not live in Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia. One may not encounter the brutal totalitarianism about which Arendt writes. Still, these days, it seems that those who live in the late stages of capitalism need to run to stay in place — *who has time for other people*?

It is hard not to feel lonely and alienated in our accelerated lives, where it seems we do not have time for anyone or time for anything. The world seems flat, dead, mute. Just a series of flickering screens. I wager that for many of us, such loneliness was also intensified by the COVID pandemic and led to what Rosa labels "muteness," and writes, echoing the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, "It may simply be that a person, thing or context, no longer speaks to us, that we no longer feel at home there, even though or even precisely when we experience recognition."

I wager that much of this has to do with how digital media has tentacled its way into our lives. As the American Political scientist Robert Putnam writes in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, at the turn of the century, "ordinary Americans shared the sense of civic malaise. We were reasonably content about our economic prospects . . .but we were not equally convinced that we were on the right track morally or culturally." From where does this loneliness stem? Many studies show that much of our current loneliness emerges from digital media, those communication technologies — from the internet to social media — that depend upon a global network of computers.

Digital media promised to connect the world, but rather than leading toward human flourishing, it seemed to embody Mark Zuckerberg's now-infamous motto: "Move fast and break things." Why? Media are not neutral transmitters of information. In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, the Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan famously writes, "The medium is the message" (1973). He means by his cryptic aphorism that human communication not only conveys information but also structures how we interact with other people. Communication tools do not just transmit data but also structure culture and society, and how we experience our lived worlds. Imagine the difference between watching the same story as a play, as a film in a cinema, at home with one's family in front of the television, and alone on one's smartphone.

One might think that we would be less lonely with all the constant possibility of connection to other people. Studies show, however, that we are now lonelier than ever. From shopping on Amazon to streaming Netflix, our relationship with the world is ever more tenuous. Our communication seems to have to do less and less with engaging other people and more and more with being entangled in a complex network of other media. Each click of a mouse, ping of a phone, and online transaction interpolates us into a system in which loneliness is a mere by-product at best and, at worst, an intentional design.

Digital loneliness increased during the pandemic. It was easy for privileged members of the digital divide to gather material and informational resources and engage in digital mediated hedonist acts of shopping and entertainment. However, many became even more alienated during the pandemic because of social distancing and lockdown. Besides attempting not to get sick, the most challenging tasks for many were the more fundamental and subtle ones of maintaining and sustaining the human relationships, particularly friendships, that lead to human flourishing.

Not all digital media is the same. How can we cut through this loneliness? Which types of digital media might lead to resonant relationships with other people? Perhaps surprisingly, cooperative video gaming, because it ties us together with other people, might be one answer. For example, my experience shows that the cooperative fighting of trolls in the videogame *Valheim* leads to *philiagenesis*, the cultivation of friendship, which leads to ludic friendship, and eudaimonia, the condition of human flourishing and living well.

Valheim is an open-world survival sandbox videogame developed by the Swedish company Iron Gate Studio, and the current beta version was released in February

2021. The name "Valheim" denotes a mythical world where fallen Vikings go after death to prove themselves fit for the halls of Valhalla. While the game can be played solo, it is designed to be played cooperatively with up to ten other friends. Furthermore, it is this cooperative play that makes its gameplay so enjoyable. Players and their friends must craft tools, build shelters, and fight enemies in the game. They begin with nothing and soon discover that to reach the Norse afterlife, they must work together to defeat the evils that stalk *Valheim*.

Yet why ludic friendships? Many of the traditional solid social roles and relationships on which people have depended have melted into pixels in our current age, and the more flexible category of friendship has been burdened with growing importance. How can ludic friendship be generated online when one has little or no physical face-to-face interaction with one's compatriots? I would wager that one can cultivate those ludic friendships through activities such as fighting with *Valheim's* virtual trolls. In the game, the most challenging opponents one encounters early on are trolls —these are aggressive, bumbling, humanoid creatures found in the Black Forest biome. Early in the game, it takes all one's resources and cooperation as a team not to be destroyed by them.

Studies show that people usually play as part of a community when gaming. Fighting *Valheim*'s virtual trolls makes it evident that online multiplayer gaming, usually seen as an alienating and anti-social activity, can be one avenue that has allowed for social interaction and the generation of friendship while maintaining social distance. Moreover, many studies of actual gamers also make it evident that videogaming can have pro-social outcomes. As Nick Bowman, Associate Professor of Creative Media Industries at Texas Tech University, writes, "in part due to the presumption about video games as a less serious medium, less consideration is given to the more self-referential, poignant, and meaningful outcomes of video game play — so-called eudaimonic media effects."

Let me conclude. Discovering that gaming can lead to the good life not only fleshes out Rosa's understanding of resonance, and pushes back against his rather reductionistic understanding of new media, but also informs how media should be understood in the study of American Religion. *Valheim* shows that videogaming can have pro-social benefits, one of which is the creation of ludic friendships, those cultivated through playing games. No one would question that strong social relationships are necessary for human flourishing. To flourish, each of us needs to be mindful of our loneliness and take action to lessen it. The current reality of ethical pluralism implies that we cannot define the substance or content of a good life. However, perhaps it is possible to identify some of the shared activities which afford eudaimonia. I acknowledge that online activity may not be as potent as face-to-face interactions for creating friendships. However, during the COVID pandemic and quarantine, multiplayer gaming offered a usable workaround. I also suspect that quarantine is not that unusual. It is just a concentrated version of the inevitably isolating hyper-mediated social arrangements that we all find ourselves in as residents of a late capitalistic digitally structured society.

Daniel Winchester
Purdue University

In his book, *Resonance*[1], Hartmut Rosa asks why, in a sociohistorical era where the human species has greater access to, knowledge of, and technological control over the world than ever before, do we often experience that same world as increasingly cold, foreboding, alien, even meaningless? Readers will notice that this question isn't exactly unique, as some variant of "why can't modernity just deliver the goods!?" has animated modern critical theory since its inception.

But while the question itself isn't necessarily novel, Rosa's answer to the problem of modernity is quite distinctive and I think profound. The foundational problem with as well as the latent potential within modern life, Rosa argues, has to do with the way it organizes our relationships to the world.

So here's my quick and dirty summary of a 500-plus page argument: at the most fundamental level, human beings relate to the world in one of two, dialectically-intertwined ways. One way is via a relation of alienation, where the dividing line between subject and world is very distinctly drawn and we experience estrangement from nature, significant others, our work, even our own bodies and senses of self. Anyone who has read their Marx, Adorno, or Marcuse will be familiar with the diagnosis of this type of relational experience, and Rosa makes good use of his theoretical forebearers to reiterate the argument that the fundamental problem with modern life is that it promotes, encourages, even necessitates alienated relationships. Modern society requires constant economic growth, technological innovation, and cultural transformation in order to simply maintain its status quo, and so we relate to our social, cultural, and natural environments not as potential zones of mutual encounter, creativity, and transformation (because who has time for all *that*?) but as objects of resistance that must be quickly subdued, controlled, and made useful to the project of escalating resource maximization and expansion.

Fortunately, Rosa does not simply leave us with a totally bleak outlook on our modern predicament. If relationships characterized by alienation are what is wrong with modernity, Rosa asks, what then would be right? What is on the "flip-side" of alienation, so to speak, the positive relational counterpart that modernity seems to warp? The answer, he argues, is "resonance."

Rosa spends a good deal of time outlining the defining characteristics of resonance—briefly: 1) affect, or the experience of being "moved" or "called" by something in the world; 2) self-efficacy, or the ability to respond or "answer back" to that which hails us; 3) mutual transformation, or the process of being changed and changing the other through the encounter; and 4) uncontrollability, or the notion that resonant relationships and experiences cannot be manufactured. But I think the best

descriptions of resonance in the book are not the analytic ones but the phenomenological. That is, we know what relations of resonance are because we sometimes experience them, even in the context of a modern world that tends toward alienation.

Let me take a stab at such an example that is likely relevant to many of the people in this room: teaching.[2] Most of us understand the practice of university teaching can be alienating, to our great chagrin. Outside of the classroom, we are constantly subjected to calls to increase enrollments (or, as it is often called at my institution, B.I.S.—"butts in seats"); harangued to construct our ever-expanding syllabi around a set of measurable but flaccid "learning outcomes" ("Students will learn to apply theoretical concepts and arguments from diverse theoretical perspectives…blah, blah"); and, of course, at the end of the semester, all of our pedagogical strategies, triumphs, failures, dead-ends, breakthroughs are lovingly condensed into a numeric score of "teaching effectiveness" ("congrats, you're a 4.27!"). And, of course, inside the classroom can be an alienating experience as well, when we realize our students didn't do the reading (again), don't respond to any of our probes or questions, and the "culturally relevant" YouTube video we found just before class isn't working due to some technological glitch, leading the students' blank stares to transform into eye-rolls.

But we know this isn't the whole story. Because sometimes something else happens. We go into class, like any normal day, with our slides prepared and our "learning objectives" in mind. And then we pose our first question about the topic for the day expecting that long awkward silence and those blank stares and—boom!—a student responds. And they say something insightful, maybe even brilliant. And then another student responds to them. And another, maybe one who hasn't said three words all semester, jumps in with a personal experience that provides more insight that any example the old, dead European man they read came up with. And, by the end of the class, you haven't made it through any of your slides, you have no idea if you've met the defined learning objective, you feel you've learned as much from your students as they've learned from you, and YOU COULD NOT BE MORE THRILLED.

That is resonance. When the relational ties between you, your students, the course material, and that vaguely-defined value we call education are not "flat" or "mute" but vibrate with a musical intensity that moves us, calls us to respond in kind, and is mutually transformative.

What is interesting here is that Rosa presents us with several examples that are akin to this, examples where the very same practice can be experienced as totally different depending on the quality of the relationships animating them. When people work, read, share a meal, drive their kids to school, engage a colleague's ideas, have sex, pray to their

gods – each one of these practices could be characterized by relations of alienation or resonance. The problem, according to Rosa, is that modernity encourages us to relate to everything through an instrumental, command and control, resource accumulation and maximization logic (paging Max Weber). The solution, he says, is to attempt to reorganize the social order to enhance resonance, to allow those people, things, and, yes, gods to which people relate speak to us "in their own voices" and enable us to respond in kind. It is, to borrow the terminology of Alisdair MacIntyre[3], to create a modernity oriented toward encountering the goods *internal* to our practices and relationships instead of one primarily organized via the external logics of capital, status, and resource accumulation. It is to not only individually but structurally and culturally prioritize the meaningfulness of the practices and relationships themselves over and above consideration of how they can help us acquire power, status, control, or domination over some segment of the world.

So, in the very limited time I have left, where does the study of religion fit into all of this? While I have no direct knowledge of Rosa's religious identifications or background, it is clear from the book that he is a sympathetic analyst of religion. Along with the more secular sources of nature, art, and history, Rosa sees religion as retaining the potential for the construction of axes of resonance through which moderns can encounter the world and one another not as resources or objects of subordination and control but as autonomous subjects to be encountered and engaged.

But, as we know, religion does not always—and perhaps does not in the main—operate this way. As we have learned from both the scholarship of people in this room and the insights of another eminent European relational theorist, Pierre Bourdieu, even the most seemingly value-based and "other-worldly" oriented institutions can, at base, be organized and motivated by the quest for capital, control, domination.[4] Indeed, from the perspective of Bourdieu's field theory, religion is just one more arena of modern struggle and competition, a quest not to mutually transform but to "increase one's share" of the world. One here need only think of the conversations that we had earlier today around the topic of Christian nationalism, where the country must be "taken back" for God (a.k.a., white Christian men).

What I think this tension means is not that we should "choose sides"—is religion fundamentally alienating or is it resonance-inducing? Rather, it means that we need to inquire into the powerful possibilities of both alienation and resonance within the diverse forms of modern religious life. This would necessitate going beyond the content of various religious traditions and interrogating the modes of relation to the world that specific communities cultivate. What are the social structures, practices, and enculturated dispositions that lead some religious communities and practitioners to relate to the world as a resonant zone of encounter and potential transcendence where, for example, the image of God is not to be found in a distant Heaven but in the face of the outsider or the outcast right in front of us? And, at the same time, what are those structures, practices, and dispositions that lead other religious communities and practitioners (often within the very same larger religious tradition) to relate to the world as so many points of resistance that must be subdued and controlled in the name of imposing a perceived divine or sacred order?

To diagnose and recognize both these alienating and resonant potentials of religion, we need to couple the "hermeneutics of suspicion" that scholars like Bourdieu encourage us to adopt with a 'hermeneutics of generosity' that takes seriously not only the quest for power and status but also for transcendence and mutuality. Only when we hold out the possibility that sometimes hidden or fugitive fields of resonance can lurk within the alienating field of power—that religious as well as other practices are sometimes oriented to and even make contact with goods that cannot simply be reduced to another form of capital—can we do justice to the perils and promises of religion for cultivating anything approaching the good life in modernity. While there is certainly much more work to be done here, and several blindspots in Rosa's own treatment of the issue, I believe *Resonance* provides us with much-needed tools for advancing a positive critique of modern social relationships, if only to be able to better imagine and build toward what a modernity that finally "delivers the Good[s]" might look like.

---

[1] Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World* (Cambridge, UK and Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2019).

[2] For an excellent, insightful discussion of how social scientists of education have neglected experiences of resonance and the "internal goods" of schooling, see Jeffrey Guhin and Joseph Klett, "School Beyond Stratification: Internal Goods, Alienation, and an Expanded Sociology of Education," *Theory and Society*, 51, ps 371–398 (2022)

[3] Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, (Notre Dame University Press, 1984).

[4] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field," *Comparative Social Research* 13, ps. 1-43 (1994).

Religious Practice in a Digital Culture

Traditional religious practice is always a blend of rituals passed down through the ages and the contemporary influence of technology, music, gender norms, racial and ethnic identity, and many other factors. Twentieth century religious practice was affected by greater access to print media, radio, television, the internet, and then social media and digital communication. As the pandemic forced most congregational worship into virtual worship and digital interaction, it accelerated trends already underway. How will the use of virtual presence and digital communication—including data management techniques—affect the future of American religious and spiritual gathering? Do these changes represent a victory for individualism and consumerism and a loss for communitarianism? Will some religious traditions advance as others fade? Is this different from the advent of radio or television religion and, if so, how?

Heidi Campbell
Texas A&M University

"Will they come back," asked a pastor of a small church here in Indiana, speaking of faithful members noticeably missing from their congregations as he restarted in-person services in mid-2021. "Or have our online services now given them a way to move on?" This is a response of an informant in the Tech in Churches during the COVID-19 project[1] I am running with funding from the Lilly Endowment. This research involves studying the work of 2,700 churches from across the state of Indiana who moved their services online in 2020. The pandemic has pushed many churches into using technology in ways they were not prepared for. The interesting results can be summed up by a popular 2020 internet meme featuring Forrest Gump on a bus stop bench saying: "and just like that, all the priests turned into televangelists."

Studying the role and impact of technology on religious groups is at the heart of what is called "Digital Religion studies." Digital religion research is a particular approach to studying religious engagement with technology, and one that I helped develop. It recognizes religion today is marked by both the historic character of religious traditions and the affordances of digital culture. It starts by acknowledging the pervasiveness of digital technology in our contemporary society, which is increasingly influencing religious practice and beliefs in direct and indirect ways. Digital Religion studies involves studying online and offline manifestations of religion side-by-side. It also recognizes that religious individuals and groups often seek to culture or shape media and technologies in line with their established ways of life.[2] So the digital religion approach takes into account how the embeddedness of technology is shaping the social and religious lives of many religious communities in ways that bridge and blend both online and offline contexts. Throughout my career, I have had the unique opportunity to study numerous manifestations of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian use of digital media. From studying the practices of cyber churches to digital pilgrimages to virtual Mecca and Jerusalem to the rise of Islamogaming and mobile media apps designed to help the religious pray, gather, and undertake a religious study. Like other scholars, I have been fascinated by exotic manifestations of online religion, such as digitally born religious movements like Kopimism and technopaganism. However, after three decades of research, I have found the most important work now to be done involving Digital Religion is studying lived context, or the ways religious people and groups use the internet in their everyday spiritual lives.

In my mind, the past two years have brought on the most significant period of broad change related to Digital Religion. The COVID-19 pandemic forced congregations around the globe to adapt to a new social reality. Adopting digital technologies became a common and often essential strategy for congregations to enable them to continue to function under the constraints of the pandemic. Now live streaming prayer services, congregational YouTube channels, and Zoom Bible studies have become a common part of the American religious landscape and experience. From my research during this time I have noted three trends that I would like to highlight briefly, which I believe speak to the future of religion in a post-pandemic America. Each shows how digital technologies, and the cultures they promote, are increasingly intersecting with and informing religious ways of life in the USA. First, the COVID-19 pandemic required many religious leaders to reconcile their fears and concerns about technology, with the clear benefits digital platforms offered their communities during this time. Before the pandemic, many American pastors, priests, imams, and others could have been described as "technologically resistant," choosing to actively resist or consciously avoid technologies in their work and ministries. Our research found that much of the "digital reluctance" around the internet was primarily tied to religious leaders' inexperience in three areas: (1) having little to no personal experience with using digital media, (2) having little to no training in media literacy, and (3) having little understanding of the culture created by digital technology and the implications living in an information society have for their members.[3]

However, during the first lockdown in the spring of 2020, when face-to-face meetings were no longer an option because of health and safety protocols, and many of these leaders were forced to engage with the digital world. This experimentation revealed the potential and power of technology that many religious groups were previously unaware of or had sought to avoid. I believe these encounters have forever changed many congregations' outlook and relationships with media and technology in both positive and challenging ways. In my mind, the future of religion in America will be hybrid. Churches will need to include both traditional and online forms of gathering and spiritual engagement in their ministry and outreach plans. Lessons learned by leaders about how to leverage technology for religious work need to be embraced as a long-term strategy, rather than a temporary fix-it mentality for the future vitality and versatility of their communities.

Second, the experience of doing religious services online has caused many groups to reflect on the very nature of their religious practices. By turning their embodied worship into a mediated experience, an opportunity was created to reflect and evaluate decades, if not centuries of established traditions. Our research found that the problem solving required by religious leaders to successfully transfer or translate their worship services online also raised existential questions for them about what it truly means to be a religious community "in times of deep mediatization,"

as some scholars have described.[4] The technology decision-making process leaders and members underwent and translating of liturgy and ritual online, drew attention to what they saw as their community's core beliefs and defining practices, and the extent to which they can be transformed. This has created hot theological debates and raised sociological questions for many such as:

- Which parts of religious experience need to be, or must be, embodied?
- What does it mean to be "in the community" with one another, while being online?
- Must religion be tied to a specific physical space or event? And what happens to religion when these are removed?

Some of these questions are not new within religious studies. Ask scholars who study religious diasporic communities about the issues raised by group's navigating their separation from their sacred homelands. Yet the mass migration of religious groups online during 2020 and 2021 put these considerations front and center for religious communities who had never before faced such issues.

Third, the experience of religious leaders during the pandemic has not only caused a shift in how religious groups see their relationship to online and offline contexts. It has also drawn attention to other important social moves that are or have taken place in American culture, requiring group's renegotiation with previous religious norms. One such shift I describe as the move from "supplement to substitute." In my first book, based on my Ph.D. research, I studied show and why Christians were becoming involved in online religious communities in the late 1990s.[5] When the book came out in 2005, a central argument I made was that involvement online overwhelmingly served as a supplement to, and not a substitute for, church attendance. In the late 20th century, the internet offered religious user's opportunities to become a part of various faith-focused online communities. Many found the social support created within these groups helped to supplement relational needs or other factors lacking in their offline faith community.

Over the next two decades, and based on my research, I continued to affirm this claim. However, by the mid-2010's I have found myself increasingly having to qualify this claim, with more and more exceptions. Fast forward to 2022, I assert this claim is no longer true; involvement in online religious communities or attending digital temples or churches indeed now serves as a substitute for a growing number of individuals, rather than their involvement in a face-to-face religious group. Pandemic-related health and safety concerns are not the only or even primary reason for this. Millennial and Generation Z are truly digital natives that do not remember life before the Internet and smart phones. Many first learned how to engage in social conversations or build relationships with their peers through digital or mediated means, rather than offline. Texting and social media now set the standards and patterns for what many Millennial and Generation Z view as ideal or average communication. This is a reversal of my own experience, where offline encounters served as a template for navigating online platforms as I imported face-to-face social protocols as guides for my behavior in online worlds. The pandemic experience of online schooling has further solidified this orientation towards a mediated reality for many young people, who I suggest will impact how they see the world for the rest of their lives.

So what will the future of religion in America look like, if online religious engagement becomes the standard for how they understand religiosity and religious culture more broadly? In our Research Report "When Pastors Put on the Tech Hat," we recount the question of a pastor and his staff, "do we want to be a video or digital church?"[6] He went on to explain that the response they chose would "change our trajectory as a body," changes he did not feel his staff or congregation were ready for. Will maintaining a hybrid presence challenge "nones and dones" to come through their doors, or will it reframe people's experience in a way that creates a post-church? What post-pandemic religion looks like remains to be seen, documented, and researched.

---

[1] "Reports." Tech in Churches. Accessed June 14, 2022. https://www.techinchurches.org/reports.

[2] Campbell, Heidi. "When Religion Meets New Media," Routledge, 2010. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203695371.

[3] Campbell, Heidi A, and Mandy Jordan. "The Digital Divide, Digital Reluctance and Its Impact On Pandemic Churches." OAKTrust Home, April 26, 2022. https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/195938.

[4] Kołodziejska, Marta, Łukasz Fajfer, Dorota Hall, and Kerstin Radde-Antweiler. "Religious Media Settlers in Times of Deep Mediatization." Religion, 2022, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721x.2022.2083032.

[5] Campbell, Heidi. "Exploring Religious Community Online," Routledge, 2005.

[6] Campbell, Heidi A., and Sophia Osteen. "When Pastors Put on the 'Tech Hat': How Churches Digitized during Covid-19." OAKTrust Home, November 17, 2021. https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/194959.

Monique Moultrie
Georgia State University

As a womanist/black feminist sexual ethicist, I begin with the disclosure that I engage religious media primarily through my interest in faith-based sexuality ministries. My book-length study of these online ministries reveals an interest in Black women's agency and religious leadership, and this interest is represented in this paper.[1] Here I will explore Black Protestant responses to religious practice in a digital age focusing my comments on the Black church (which I plainly understand as a predominately Black body of Christian believers), technology, and impact of COVID-19 in bringing forward a new type of Black Christian expression.

I begin with two items that frequented my social media during the early stages of the pandemic. One is an image of the word COVID-19 spelled out to represent Christ Over Various Illnesses and Diseases (Joshua 1:9—summarized as do not be afraid for God goes with you wherever you go). The other is a viral video that became a KevinOnStage comedy skit where Pastor Reginald Sharpe of the Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church, Chicago, IL replies to his congregation "The church is still open; the building is closed. You don't have to call us. You don't have to e-mail me. You don't have to DM me, we ain't comin' back up in here until it is absolutely safe."[2] These two reactions to the pandemic were shared in many Black churches as was seen in the tragic death of thirty Church of God in Christ bishops who gathered in spite of the virus for their annual religious convocation and in the many Black churches that remain in virtual worship. These responses speak to the three questions presented as our guiding prompt and these questions will govern my argument. Namely, I will address how the use of virtual presence and digital communication affects the future of Black religious gatherings; how some Black church traditions will advance as others fade; and how this digital era is qualitatively different than the advent of radio or television religion.

I concur with Africana studies scholar Erica Gault that the Black church's embodied practices represent forms of "spiritual technologies" that reflect Black people's responses to their social realities.[3] In this way, our current digital age is another iteration of this ongoing process. Yet, a notable distinction in this period is the public leadership of Black women digital innovators which impacts the future of Black religion. The future is female and not just in the pews! Black religious digital curators take up sizeable space in social media, streaming platforms, via podcasts and websites. One can argue their presence online is due to the numerous obstacles Black women face in leading in hierarchical positions in traditional Black church settings. Alternatively, this impressive female leadership is because of the creative work known as "creating digital hush harbors" where women need not diminish their artistic expression to lead.[4] Notable alternative spaces created by

Black religious women digital leaders are homiletician Melva Sampson's Pink Robe Chronicles and Pastor Danny Thomas' Unfit Christian's Facebook communities; or Dr. Irie Lynne Session and Rev. Kamilah Sharp's "Womanist Wednesdays" at The Gathering church.

Many of these women emerged as Black Millennial clergywomen who blazed trails in digital domains. In fact, ethicist Melanie Jones asserts that during the COVID crisis Black churches turned to Black digital natives, e.g. millennials to help transform virtual realms to sacred space for their churches.[5] As my study of faith-based millennial organizers indicated Black Christians are hailed by Black Christian millennials' accessibility, i.e. willingness to engage using media/pop culture/colloquialisms; and their ability to be accountable beyond just Sunday service, i.e. constant contact and community. During the pandemic and the response to what Pastor Otis Moss III calls COVID-1619, e.g. the ongoing racial persecution and devastation caused by racism, Black millennial women played a significant role in helping Black churches remain viable both as communities concerned about acknowledging that Black Lives Matter and as communities in need of tutelage to utilize the digital tools of the time. One such example is Black millennial entrepreneur Brianna Parker who consults through the Black Millennial Café to support Black churches learning to navigate virtual worship.[6]

While the support offered by Black female religious leaders and Black millennial women is admirable, in essence as they save the Black church they siphon from their own authority. As more traditional Black churches learned the savvy nature of communal virtual church these spaces became competitors for their target audiences. This competition in itself is not pejorative, but some Black female digital creators have noticed the theft of their intellectual work as Black male pastors have utilized their content without any attribution.[7] In this regard the future of Black Christianity sadly resembles the sexism of its past.

The ability to remove its sexism is one of the major predictors of whether Black churches will fade or advance. Yet, there are three other markers I hypothesize will also be important. First, post pandemic Black churches that have entered the digital age must recover its embodied church experience represented in sensory and tactile expressions. While it remains not COVID safe to hug a neighbor or give the kiss of peace, Black churches have learned to "tweet and greet" and to simulate fellowship through comments in the chat feature. Successful churches will be spaces that learn to mediate COVID protocols and media engagement.

Another major challenge facing many Black churches is the need for recovery of finances. Large numbers of Black churches were denied government PPP assistance (due to their lack of affiliation with large banks).[8] Given the disproportionate rates of Black death due to COVID-19, the

reality is many Black churches are going to have reconvene with many members and financial contributors missing. Combined with the reality that many Black churches through necessity needed to restructure their budgets to make large investments into technology, lack of access to critical funds is a significant predictor in the ability to bounce back from the pandemic. A positive new trend that will assist with the stability of Black churches is the advancements made in the digital practice of accepting donations via Givelify, text-to-give, and Cash App which encourages younger adults who are least likely to carry cash or checks the ability to participate in funding the church's mission.

A third factor in gauging whether Black churches will advance beyond this crisis is its ability to recover its rituals—not just it's baby dedications, funerals, but its syncopated rhythmic call and response known as Whooping. While some rituals like Whooping have worked surprisingly well via Zoom chat or use of the Whoop Triggerz app or even the reduction in sermon length to maintain audience attention; other rituals have faced more challenges. For example, pastoral care via phone or Zoom or family only funerals to keep crowds down have lacked the connection and empathy parishioners sought. Finding a balanced ritual that can be done virtually or in-person is still an aspect of Black churches' success.

In conclusion, I believe our current digital interventions represent something different than ones experienced via Black religious participation in radio and television. Our instant level of accessibility is a new phenomenon where Black Christians can experience worship completely at home in their pajamas, participating in some hybrid version of the in-person service, or being present in the pews. In fact, in Barna's released 2021 survey data, 41% of Black churchgoers expressed a preference for hybrid church models to continue.[9] These ongoing multiple modalities represent many different ways to engage in religious community which also can involve intimate and physical connection with congregants which is new. Another difference is the accountability made possible by our current times. Missteps are saved for posterity and even made into memes. While congregants have as much choice as their internet access provides instead of changing churches, they can remain in community and heckle, castigate, or call for correction in real time. An additional change is the democratization provided by even basic internet access. Televangelism and radio ministries were expensive and only available to churches of means but basically anyone with a decent phone can go Live in service now. Greater access to cheaper technology also means if churches want to pre-record to get "perfect" worship they can do so with only their time as a prohibiting factor which gives more options of polished services available to consumers. A final difference between the innovations of radio and television is the larger number of Black women leaders who create something unique that can be easily accessed by audiences. As Melva Sampson contends "something happens when Black women

are in a digital space" which allows for spaces of safety, trust, and community available without the church politics or church hurt typical in traditional Black church spaces.[10] The digital space occupied by Black religious women expands the present and future of Black Christianity and is a phenomenon scholars of American religion and culture should track.

---

[1] Monique Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious: Religious Media and Black Women's Sexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[2] Pastor Reginald W. Sharpe Jr., "More Gifts In The Fire," Fellowship Chicago, YouTube video, 1:14, streamed on May 17, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_uDWUiJwZuQ.

[3] Erica Gault, "My People Are Free!: Theorizing the Digital Black Church" *Fire!!!* 6, no. 1 (2020): 3. DOI: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5323/48581551.

[4] Melva Sampson, "Digital Hush Harbors: Black Preaching Women and Black Digital Networks." *Fire!!!* 6, no. 1 (2020): 46. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5323/48581553.

[5] Melanie Jones, "Who's Saving Whom? Black Millennials and the Revivification of Religious Communities," in *Religion, Race, and COVID-19: Confronting White Supremacy in the Pandemic*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 55.

[6] Ibid,, 72.

[7] Candice Benbow, "While More Black Churches Come Online Due to Coronavirus, Black Women Faith Leaders Have Always Been Here" *Essence*, March 24, 2020. https://www.essence.com/feature/more-black-churches-online-coronavirus-black-women-faith-leaders-always-been-here/.

[8] Tom Gjelten, "Black Pastors Say They Have Trouble Accessing SBA Loan Program," NPR, April 25, 2020. https://www.npr.org/2020/04/25/844802957/black-pastors-say-they-have-trouble-accessing-sba-loan-program.

[9] "41% of Black Churchgoers Favor a Hybrid Future," Barna, July 15, 2021. https://www.barna.com/research/tibc-hybrid-future/.

[10] Candice Benbow, "While More Black Churches Come Online Due to Coronavirus, Black Women Faith Leaders Have Always Been Here" *Essence*. March 24, 2020. https://www.essence.com/feature/more-black-churches-online-coronavirus-black-women-faith-leaders-always-been-here/.

Scott Thumma
Hartford International University

Over the past two years, I've engaged in an extended conversation on the topic of this session with a former megachurch pastor. This pastor had a 3,500-attender church, multisite campuses, significant technological experience, and currently runs a consulting company that helps smaller churches with tech and worship issues. On the side, he is also the pastor of a small mainline church with a substantial endowment. Throughout the pandemic, his church produced creative and engaging online worship, amazing musical performances, and as a result attracted virtual "members" from around the country. Yet he admitted to me that he had no clue how to turn his successful pandemic worship experience into an authentic Hybrid Church. He proposed a course on the topic at a local seminary, thinking that would help him better understand the challenge. This course would be happening while I'm giving this presentation except that too few clergy and seminary students signed up for him to offer it. This lack of interest does not bode well for the future of religious practice in a post-pandemic digital culture.

Religious practice happens corporately and individually. My approach here today is to address the question we heard yesterday, "what is happening in the churches?" and focus on corporate religious practices. Vocationally, I explore congregational dynamics from a practical and applied research perspective in a seminary. Additionally, I'm engaged in a sizable ongoing five-year project to study churches through and after the pandemic (Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations www.covidreligionresearch.org) and a 20-year project tracking congregational change in the Faith Communities Today (www.faithcommunitiestoday.org) project. All the data described below are derived from these two research projects.

Let me say from the outset of this presentation, corporate religious practice, digital and otherwise, is now a moving target. Each of the three pandemic surveys we completed in the past nine months describe a rapidly changing reality.

Prior to the pandemic, the trends in churches over the past 20 years indicated an ever-increasing adoption of technology and social media within worship and the work of the faith community, and this is especially true since 2015. Yet upon a closer look, it was clear that most churches were not adequately prepared technologically for the pandemic challenges.

In early 2020, just prior to the lockdown, we surveyed over 15,000 congregations. At that time, 92% used Facebook but just 50% did so "a lot." More than half (58%) livestreamed their services, but only 20% reported any "virtual worship attendance"—with the majority indicating viewership of 10 people or less. Half of congregations had some form of online giving, but on average just 10% of their income was contributed this way. Therefore, on the eve of the pandemic, it is fair to say that most churches were not overly adept at using the technology they had nor was it a key component of their pre-pandemic functioning.

Amazingly, just a few months later, these same churches proved to be far more adaptive than I would have ever guessed. The necessary adaptations made because of the mandatory lockdown certainly intensified and accelerated these trends. However, what the lockdown essentially did was force many churches to make a leap to dependency on virtual worship and digital communication methods that they would never have made of their own free will. This is a critical factor to keep in mind when speculating on the longevity of such activities.

Congregational size is also a critical variable in this dynamic. Before the pandemic, increased adoption of a digital reality went hand in hand with larger church size. But the majority of churches in the United States are small. The median worship attendance for the 350,000 or more U.S. congregations now stands at a median of 65 attendees, half of what it was in 2000 with a median of 138. It is also important to remember that roughly 70% of all U.S. weekly attendees worship in the largest 10 percent of churches. With two-thirds of the nation's congregations under 100 weekly attendees pre-pandemic, the resources to embrace a robust digital religious presence long-term are quite limited.

First, we need to address the digital practices during the pandemic before turning to a discussion of the future of virtual religious life. Initially, it is important to keep in mind that 10 to 15 percent of churches never went virtual; they either closed or they defied closure mandates and continued meeting in-person. Nevertheless, most churches went fully online, then mutated over time to a mix of in-person, outdoor, and virtual worship. Currently, 80% of all congregations are hybrid with 5% still fully virtual. This means that between 2015 and 2022, the percentage of U.S. churches with virtual worship rose from 19% to 85%. During the past two pandemic years, two-thirds of churches reinvented their small groups, religious education, committee meetings, and music programs into online or hybrid formats. Our research showed that converting Sunday School programs for children and youth into a virtual format was a sure way to decimate those programs; however, offering virtual adult educational programs increased participation. At this same time, many churches discontinued their fellowship activities and other programs that strengthen community and commitment.

This adaptive digital challenge was shared by all churches in equal measure. The very small (under 50) never changed and the largest had already made these adaptations and likely already had trained employees to support their

efforts. Rather, those churches with attendance of 50-250 suffered the most, often existing without adequately trained staff or the internal resources to successfully transition virtual reality. Thus, many church members experienced a rather makeshift, lackluster, and uninspiring version of their pre-pandemic worship event devoid of the intimate social interactions, coffee hours, gossip, and other rewarding social dimensions of the typical corporate religious experience.

The challenge at this nearly post-pandemic moment is that churches are no longer in crisis mode but neither are they "back to normal." Attendance is roughly 20 to 40 percent below 2019 levels in all but a third of churches, even when combining in-person and virtual attendance. Those churches that are back to pre-pandemic attendance and functioning are the ones that most quickly resumed in-person worship, and even drew participants away from congregations that remained closed too long or only worshipped virtually.

An analysis of the churches that are currently employing hybrid worship indicates that those with a greater percentage of members attending in-person are more likely to be growing in attendance and look more vital in terms of increased volunteers, member participation, and contributions per capita. Essentially, the larger the percentage of virtual attendees a church has, the less their giving, volunteering, and overall participation is generally. In other words, too great of a reliance on virtual congregational religious practices, while necessary for the pandemic moment, appears detrimental to the health of the organization in the long run. However, it does seem that offering a balanced hybrid approach, where between 25 to 50 percent of the participants engage virtually, has the value of providing greater access and opportunity for larger numbers of worship service attendees.

Our data seems to imply that the more mediated the worship and religious experience is, the less impactful it is. Virtual spectatorship of the worship service alone diminishes engagement within the faith community when measured by giving, participation in activities, volunteering, and other such involvement indicators. Whether this is a result of inadequate virtual worship presentations or a byproduct of two years of pandemic unsettledness, the present health of many churches, even with the increased use of technology, is certainly threatened. A significant challenge for religious leaders in a post-pandemic reality to address this threat will be to entice these virtual attendees into a state of greater commitment.

It does seem as if certain social media practices embraced during the pandemic such as Facebook chats, daily pastoral email meditations, and Zoom Bible studies have strengthened individual spiritual practices during trying times of the past two years, but our research suggests that these activities may also distance members from in-person congregational religious participation.

The COVID-19 virtual religious experiment forced many churches to adopt technologies that, while necessary, were foreign to their culture and religious practice. It is highly unlikely most of these adaptations will remain at any robust level for very long in many churches, and especially those with attendance under 250 people. Even though I have long promoted the adoption of such technologies for congregations in my seminary classes because it promotes greater participatory inclusion for those unable to attend in-person, provides "on demand" access to spiritual goods, and creates the possibility of a virtual church experience; nevertheless, for two-thirds of America's churches this digital ideal seems like a dismaying prospect. However, given that the religious landscape is in a continually evolving moment, the future remains uncertain. What is certain, though, is that our current research efforts will continue to track this evolving dynamic.

Digital Scholarship and Teaching

The "Pandemic Pivot" required faculty to move their courses online. Communities of colleagues across the nation shared ideas on busy Facebook feeds. Some made this move easier than others, based upon individuals' experience with online teaching. In an instant, our teaching joined the burgeoning digital scholarship that marked various disciplines working in American religion. What is the future of digital scholarship and teaching? How are they tied together or distinct? What are the unique challenges and advantages of digital work? How would you characterize the current state of affairs and what is on the horizon?

Arthur Farnsley
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

The Association of Religion Data Archives, ARDA (www.thearda.com), is a collection of resources useful for religion teaching and research. ARDA is coming up on its 25th anniversary and is about to undergo a total site redesign that will appear in mid-August of 2022. Best of all, the ARDA has moved to the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture with our colleague Andrew Whitehead as co-director.

ARDA was founded by Penn State professor Roger Finke in 1998. He was joined soon thereafter by Christopher Bader of Chapman University in Anaheim, CA. The original goal of ARDA was to make survey results available to the entire research community once the principal investigator who conducted the survey was finished with the data. In essence, foundations and universities paid a lot of money for surveys. Researchers conducted the surveys and published their results. And then the data went to data heaven, never to be seen again by the research community.

This session is about digital scholarship and teaching, so it's fair to ask to what degree ARDA represents either of those things—but this presentation is not an exploration of the etymology or philosophy behind those terms. ARDA was meant to be the repository of that data—and it still is. As such, it was way, way out in front in digitizing data and making it easily available to anyone with access to digital instruments. The site has over 1,000 data files, each cleaned and organized so that anyone can access the results without any special expertise. For instance, the General Social Survey (GSS), conducted by NORC in Chicago every two years, is the best survey data that includes religion. Philip Goff, Peter Thuesen, and I added three minutes worth of questions to this survey in 2012 (at a cost of $90,000). On the ARDA, GSS questions are easily accessed and studied.

Beyond the GSS, there are hundreds of data files from standard survey sources like Pew and Baylor. And there are dozens of surveys conducted by denominations, plus surveys that merge denominational studies, such as Faith Communities Today (FACT). When everyone sitting in this room is gone, the data from these surveys will survive, always accessible for future generations of researchers. I would argue that is another important digital contribution.

As time went on, ARDA built even greater access for people who are not research professionals. Not only can anyone see the data without any special software, they can manipulate the data. For instance, they can run crosstabs where they look at a variable while organizing by another variable such as race, gender, or religious tradition. They can also learn how others have constructed questions they might wish to use in their own survey. This is extremely important because the more we all use the same format for a question, the more utility that question has. We can see if our research

replicates, or challenges, the work of others. When similar questions are worded differently, this comparison is not always possible.

As a teaching tool, ARDA harnesses a truly giant amount of digital information and makes it available to classrooms via simple procedures at no cost to the end-user.

Below is a small sample of the data available on the site:
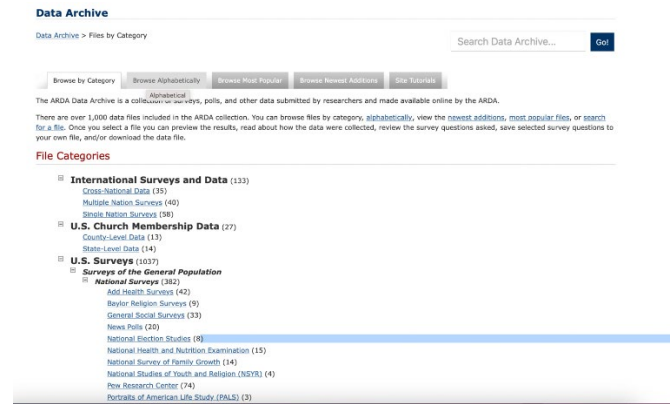
Not surprisingly, over the years the main funders of the ARDA requested new functions to engage different groups of potential users. The research tools are extraordinary, and the site is best known among people who study religion quantitatively, but the main funders, the Lilly Endowment and the John Templeton Foundation, both wanted to expand access to religion data to professors, secondary school teachers, journalists, civic officials and clergy and religion administrators who needed such tools for planning.

This led to a wide variety of resources that reach far beyond survey data. Here is a brief summary of some of those resources and their scope:

International Profiles

Using data from the World Religion Database (WRD), the ARDA has a wealth of data about every country on earth. it also uses the Religion and State project to reflect the realities of state control over religion in each of these countries. Here is an example, but you can see all the other data available by clicking other tabs.
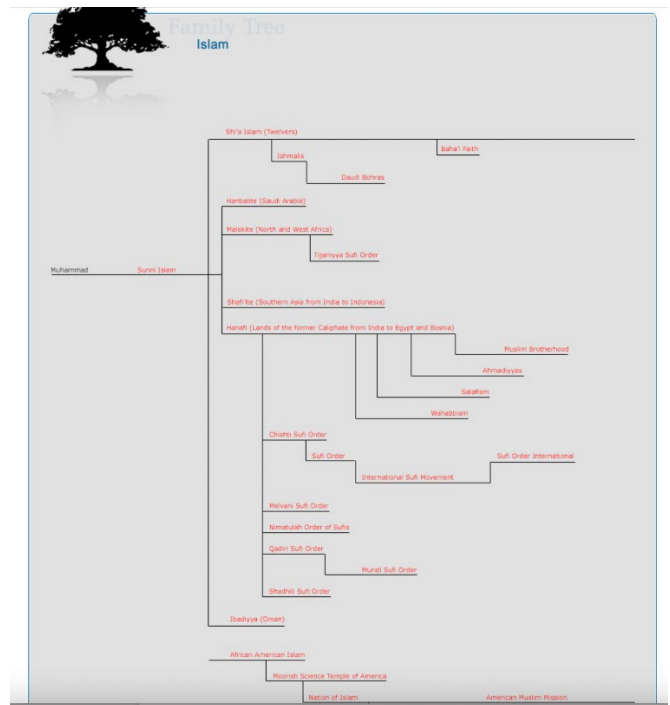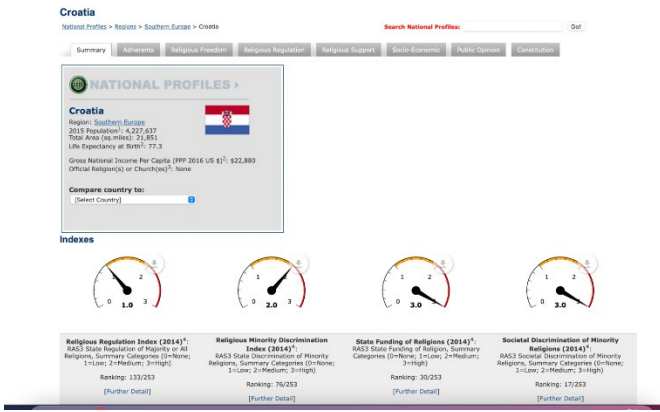
U.S. Congregational Membership

ARDA has the best-available data on which kinds of religious congregations exist in different parts of the U.S. and how many adherents they have. This data comes from the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (ASARB—motto: Always a Party.) This data can be seen in table form, but it can also be seen in map form or in bar charts, which many people find easier to understand.
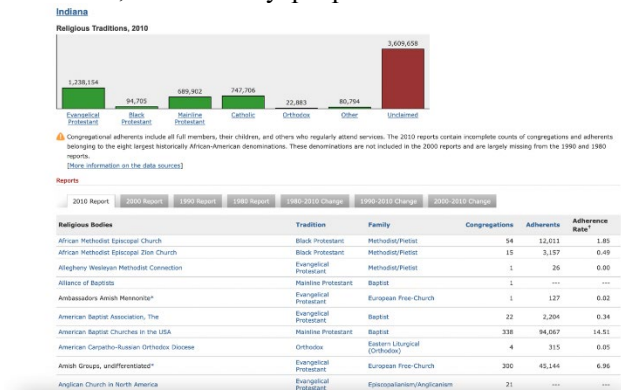
Religious Groups

The ARDA has family trees for different world religions and highly-detailed trees for American religious bodies. For the 30 largest denominations in the U.S., it has "landing pages" where members can find all the data for their denomination located in one place. On the family trees below, every red link goes to further information about that group.

Interactive Timelines

The site also offers historical timelines across a wide range of religion topics. Again, each link takes the reader to further information available on the site and to pictures available in the public domain.

Specific Professional Resources

Finally, the site presents resources specifically designed for use by journalists or congregational planners or teachers. For instance, ARDA sponsors data-driven journalism that is distributed by Religion News Service.

ARDA provides lesson plans, syllabi, and even guided worksheets teaching students to use ARDA resources and to use data more generally:

For congregations, ARDA works with the Nazarene denomination based in Kansas City to provide local profiles that include census data.

Conclusion

In a session on digital research, it is important to note that the ARDA does not, by itself, conduct religion research. It makes research results easily accessible. However, every person associated with the ARDA conducts their own research in some capacity, so they are especially interested in the quality of the data presented.

Remarkably, nobody involved in the ARDA does it as a full-time job. It has always been pieced together by a series of small contracts to people who are interested in religion research and committed to democratizing access to religion data.

Rachel McBride Lindsey
Saint Louis University

Abrief, slightly cranky, throat clearing before I raise what I think to be a crucial disciplinary question at this historical moment: it is helpful, I think, to make a distinction early on between the *use* of digital technologies as instructional modalities—whether that means A/V equipment in an on-campus classroom, the migration of courses developed in classroom spaces onto course management platforms, or the adoption of remote learning software—and, on the other, intentional development of courses that not only utilize digital tools for achieving learning outcomes but as mechanisms of knowledge production in their own right. Obviously, I think it is safe to assume that most of us do, or at least *try to do*, both of these things in our classes—we both use and scrutinize digital technologies—and the pandemic has pushed these disciplinary reflections to the forefront of our pedagogical activities. I also think we can move past the conflation of online instruction and digital scholarship with haste.

So I start with this deferential throat clearing, this preaching to the choir, this pageantry of the aha!, because I want to ask what we mean by digital scholarship in the fields of American religion (or American religions, or American religious history, or religion in the Americas, or whatever configuration of our shared object of study rings most true to you, dear reader) and what we expect digital teaching and scholarship to yield to the production of knowledge about religion and the work of religion in American life and culture.

Here are my questions: Do digital scholarship and digital pedagogy provide a way out of our field's historical complicity with regimes of power that privilege whiteness, patriarchy, and textual authority, or do they promise change while delivering more of the same? Are we tempted by new tools that ultimately tell the same stories in our classrooms and in our research or do these tools open us to new forms of knowledge production? These are the questions that hover over my own scholarship and teaching and I'm going to attempt to limn these questions more fully by asking another, perhaps seemingly absurd, question—how do we think about, collect, and interpret material objects and embodied practices in digital spaces?

Digital Pedagogy and Digital Scholarship

My point of entry into this conversation is through a teaching project that I began with students at Saint Louis University in the fall of 2016 and a public-facing research and teaching initiative that grew out of that original project and, especially, the questions about digital research, embodied religion, and public scholarship that it prompted.

Briefly, Arch City Religion began as a class project in an introductory service course that I was teaching several sections of each semester.[1] At first it was a culminating group project that incorporated visual and, occasionally, audio sources into a group report on a person, object, or place in St. Louis that students identified and interpreted through their own emerging categories of religion. Rather than regurgitating information, the project required (and was usually met with) original research, sussing through categories and classifications, and synthesis of materials into a short report. Students used file sharing platforms to submit their work, which I then compiled onto a website.

Over a few semesters the instructions got clearer and the digital component was more transparent—this was a digital storytelling project, wherein images and sounds were as integral to the report as the text. I was eventually able to design an undergraduate course around religion in St. Louis—also called Arch City Religion—in which the methodologies of digital scholarship, fieldwork, and digital storytelling were built more robustly into the design. But something began to nag at me over these few years: Were the visual and audio materials that students were collecting and creating constituting new forms of data or were they simply new data points in existing paradigms that were developed in pre-digital (and decisively bibliocentric) contexts? Were digital tools revealing something new or redescribing what we already know?

Lived Religion in the Digital Age, a teaching, research, and public-facing initiative that I co-direct with my colleague Pauline Lee, began in 2018 as an opportunity to develop more intentional research practices utilizing digital tools in order to contribute to a more robust public understanding of religion.[2] We initially conceptualized the city of St. Louis and the surrounding metropolitan area as a "laboratory" for the study of lived religion but have since reconceptualized the city more accurately as an interlocutor. I want to be clear: in my own work and in this project, I have no interest in defending lived religion as an approach to the study of religion. That interpretive approach freights assumptions and consequences as much as any other interpretive regime. I also think that critical interrogation of lived religion is overdue. But in classrooms and in public-facing fora, "lived religion" is a convenient shorthand for a range of distinctive departures from commonplace understandings of what religion is and does. "Digital age" in the project's title, furthermore, is a periodization that refers as much to the context as it does to the content of study.

One of several outcomes for the project has been to conceptualize, design, and build a Lived Religion fieldwork app. Still in a final push of beta development, the app is intended to provide a convenient tool for scholars and

students, on the backend, to identify and document "lived religion" wherever they are and, on the user experience end, to have access to a robust, multisensory inventory of religious life and practice. The app is deliberately and self-consciously designed to de-privilege (but not eliminate) conventional "steeple counting" approaches to religion in place by organizing data by categories of objects, events, people, and locations (where in "religious building" is only one of several options). Our hope is that, when they are made available, the app will be of interest to researchers and educators and the database will be of interest and use to a whole range of users in a variety of fields and professions.

Provocation

As exciting as these projects are, and, if I may, as important as they could be, big questions that demand scrutiny still linger. The LR app, as one example, is premised on the idea that starting with shared places instead of categories of religion will facilitate more robust public understanding of religion that push beyond literacy of traditions and toward the cultural, social, and political entanglements of religious histories, ideas, practices, representations, and imaginations in American life. But I reluctantly came to recognize that it is sleight of hand to suggest that an image or sound clip or video is a more reliable record of religion as it is lived. Indeed the architecture of the app requires a very precise classification schema that forecloses possibilities of content. Even as that architecture changes with cycles of feedback from users with different positions, insights, and expectations, the requisite precision of software coding works against the grain of multisensory embodied experience.

What am I getting at here? Here's my messy attempt to state the problem: Beyond a handful of projects, the vast majority of digitization efforts in the study of religion are centered around texts and institutional religious structures.[3] In terms of accessibility, preservation, and content-analysis, this is all well and good. But as we continue to navigate the transition from a predominately "old" to a predominately "new" media landscape, in our classrooms and in our research, wherein objects from the past and lived experiences in the present are freighted into a digital existence, we are faced with the task of scrutinizing *the extent to which digital technologies are used to enforce modes of thought and police habits of perception that were borne of earlier technocultural regimes*. Stated differently, how might we utilize new modes of data collection and analysis not only to preserve, access, and interpret forms of knowledge produced in the past—and too often beholden to epistemics of privilege—but to hold our field to account and to move the field forward? If the transformation from material objects and lived experiences to digital products is a process of, for lack of a better term, *translation* that is also always a process of *interpretation*, then how do we account for these processes in ways that accomplishes both

interpretive integrity and representational clarity? How do we build this accountability into our classrooms? I am not sure that this is possible. But I hope that we try.

---

[1] Arch City Religion, accessed June 14, 2022, www.archcityreligion.org, This site was in active production from 2016-2019 and has been maintained as an archive before its contents are moved to the Lived Religion in the Digital Age database.

[2] "About Us," Lived Religion in the Digital Age, accessed June 14, 2022, https://religioninplace.org/blog/about-us/.

[3] Lincoln Mullen's survey of projects in this issue cites many of these innovative projects, including the American Religious Sounds Project, the Material and Visual Cultures of Religion initiative, and the Religion and Cities project.

Lincoln A. Mullen
George Mason University

One of the key questions for this panel is "What is the future of digital scholarship and teaching?" My thesis today is that "digital scholarship" is fading away and will soon be gone for good … and that's a good thing for the field of American religion.

Let me explain.

The gold standard for scholarly publishing has long been the peer-reviewed monograph and the peer-reviewed journal article. It was not always thus. It was the post–World War II university that developed our current fixation with these forms and especially the fixation on peer review.[1] Of course scholarship before computers took place in print, but its form was quite varied, with dictionaries, reference works, collections of sources, and other such genres taking a place alongside the monograph and article.

Today scholars in humanities disciplines, including the field of American religion, are once again pursuing scholarship in a wide variety of new, digital forms.[2] That scholarship, and the people who create it, are often lumped under the term "digital humanities," which has replaced the older but perhaps more useful terms "humanities computing" or "new media." I take that term "digital humanities" to refer not primarily to the scholarship but primarily to the networks of people who are interested in digital scholarship as digital, and even more as a "tactical term" to advance certain kinds of scholarship.[3] As DH has become its own field, the digital humanities have become self-referential. A major shortcoming of the field, in my view at least, is that much DH scholarship aims to make contributions to the field of DH itself and only secondarily, if at all, to make an interpretative offering back to specific fields, such as the field of American religion.[4]

As big a tent as it may be, however, the field of digital humanities can scarcely claim to cover all the digital scholarship being created. Rather, more and more scholars who think of themselves first and foremost as scholars of American religion are creating digital scholarship as a means to understanding the field of American religion, and not primarily as a contribution to the field of digital humanities. I believe that over time, as more religion scholars choose to create digital scholarship, the "digital" in "digital scholarship" will come to be regarded as unremarkable and the adjective will drop away, leaving only the unmarked noun "scholarship."[5]

Of course when making a prediction, it is difficult to distinguish between what one thinks will happen and what one hopes will happen. But I am willing to admit that both think that this will be the future of digital scholarship in our field, and that it *ought* to be its future. We ought to be, and in fact are, heading towards a future where scholars of American religion will create scholarship in whichever media best suit their inquiries.

But before "digital scholarship" can be just "scholarship," we must solve certain problems inherent in the newness of these media. Let me enumerate the most important difficulties in creating scholarship. While these problems are shared across the humanities, American religion scholars are actively working on solving them for our field.

1. What is the form of digital scholarship? The form of the article and the monograph are well established. The form of podcasts is also well established, because they can take their cue from radio. Digital scholarship has already started to sort itself out into different forms or genres which work to advance scholarly claims. For example, the Story Map as a form enables narrative or argument set against a spatial context.[6] But we will need to create more forms of digital scholarship to suit our purposes, and perhaps identify some dead ends that do not.

2. How can we take advantage of the abundance or affordances of digital media? The abundance of digital media enables us to consider publishing materials we would never otherwise. (The cost is negligible to add another page to a website, but try to get your publisher to let you add an extra 100 pages to your book.) The affordances of digital media allows us to include audio, video, 3D models, interactive visualizations, hypertext prose, and any number of other kinds of content not readily published via print.

3. How can the form of digital media advance interpretative claims? The monograph and the journal article both excel as forms that allow for argumentative or interpretative claims. Digital scholarship, by comparison, has often fallen down when trying to make interpretations.

4. Can we integrate the theoretical insights of religious studies without compromise in digital media? For example, we understand that religious identity is not synonymous with institutional affiliation; so how do we avoid reducing either to a point on the map?[7]

Let me briefly discuss a handful of projects in American religion which are doing the work of resolving those open questions about new scholarly media.

The most pressing problem dividing digital scholarship from conventional is the difficulty of making interpretative claims with digital media. One project which has done an excellent job in overcoming this barrier is *Uncivil Religion*, out of the University of Alabama and the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.[8] This project about the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol combines two well-established genres: it is an edited collection of essays, and it is a digital collection and preservation project. The site reproduces and preserves primary sources from places such as TikTok or YouTube, providing a far more detailed view of religion's role in the

Capitol insurrection than journalistic coverage. But the key is that the essays are woven together with the primary sources in a way which offers interpretative scholarship about the key question of white Christian nationalism that is animating the field.

Another interpretative project is Rachel Wheeler and Sarah Eyerly's "Singing Box 331: Re-Sounding Eighteenth-Century Mohican Hymns from the Moravian Archives."[9] This project offers both interpretative, historical claims about a Mohican hymn and also recreates the sound of that hymn through recorded video. This project is a blend between conventional scholarship and digital scholarship. On the one hand, the project was published as an article in the *William and Mary Quarterly*. But on the other hand, the project has also been published in a born-digital version which takes advantage of multimedia and hypertext approaches to writing history. The project thus shows how to take advantage of the useful parts of a conventional, print form and the affordances of new media.

The digital collection is a well-established form which takes advantage of the abundance of the medium, but even collections that are not so explicitly interpretative as *Uncivil Religion* are doing more to surface their implicit arguments. Here are three such collections, loosely defined.

Places, Perspectives out of Middle Tennessee State University seeks to document "African American Community-Building in Tennessee, 1860–1920," specifically as organized around churches and schools.[10] This project is noteworthy for its community engagement in gathering and digitizing the records. In addition to offering a large collection of documents and images, it also offers interpretive glosses which put the sources in historical context.

A second collecting project is *American Religious Sounds* out of Ohio State University.[11] While also featuring some interpretative exhibits, the collection of sounds is front and center for the project. What is noteworthy is the approach of these scholars to the materials. Sounds studies are certainly not impossible in print, but the affordances of the digital medium offer some obvious advantages. But this project evidences a level of theoretical sophistication more typical of print than digital scholarship to date.

A third collecting project, so to speak, is *Century of Black Mormons* out of the University of Utah.[12] This is not a collection of primary sources, but rather collected biographies of Black Latter-day Saints. The form—a biographical dictionary—is familiar to print scholarship. Here the digital medium enables a prosopographical argument about the experiences of the first-generation of Black Mormons, rather than the kind of argument enabled by a monograph.

Next we can turn our attention to media in which the scholarly product is not primarily prose.

Podcasting's explosive growth as a popular medium has been matched by new scholarly contributions to the medium. The chief genres for podcasts (interview shows, conversation shows, narrative podcasts) are derived from radio. I will mention a few examples. Kristian Petersen's series at *Marginalia*, now completed, on *Directions in the Study of Religion* is an interview show; the *Religion and Cities Podcast* is a topical podcast on the specific theme of religion as contagion, as will be Brad Stoddard's forthcoming topical podcast on religious drug use; Megan Goodwin and Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst's podcast *Keeping It 101* is a general introduction to the study of religion.[13] One need not be overly alarmed about statistics about how many Americans read a book to realize that if we care about communicating with public audiences, audio and video are incredibly important.[14] These scholars and many others have managed to take advantage of the form to create new scholarship or communicate about scholarship created in other forms.

When we move beyond prose, there are also quantitative and visual representations of religion. Even the practitioners of these arts acknowledge that this is shakier ground: it is simply more difficult to encapsulate justifiable theories of religion in numbers or pictures than in words.

Nevertheless, mapping has been the form of visualization with which historians and other humanities scholars have been most comfortable, no doubt because print maps have long been a part of books and because of the work that scholars have done to advance the spatial humanities.[15] As one example, Jeanne Kilde and her collaborators have mapped *Houses of Worship in the Twin Cities*.[16] This project is primarily a visualization, but its maps urban space and is critically informed by Kilde's other writings on religious space. Two more recent projects are the collection of maps created by Harold Morales and his team at the Center for the Study of Religion and the City at Morgan State University, and *Mapping Black Religion* created by Nicole Myers Turner at Virginia Commonwealth University.[17] Both of these projects have advanced the form of digital mapping to include a narrative or interpretation keyed to the map. They are also more tightly focused, argumentative maps, focused on racial inequities in Baltimore in the first instance, or on the development of Black institutions in the nineteenth century in the second. Over time, scholars have improved the form of maps and visualizations to make them better suited for advancing interpretative claims and integrating the humanistic questions that drive the rest of the field.

Then there is methodological advancement. I will mention as examples two scholars who have done significant work bringing digital methods to bear on questions of form and interpretative claims. Jeri Wieringa's dissertation on Ellen Harmon White and the Seventh-day Adventists is the first entirely born-digital dissertation in the study of American religion, and one of only two or three in the broader discipline of history. Wieringa has demonstrated convincingly that the most rigorous scholarship can be published entirely digitally, and also that it can be based on advanced methods of text analysis or distant reading.[18] Jannelle Legg has created a digital map as a part of her

dissertation demonstrating the expansion of deaf space across the United States, tied to the development of deaf schools and the itinerancy of ministers who were a part of the Episcopal mission to Deaf-Mutes.[19]

Finally, I will mention two of the several projects that at team of us at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media are working on that I hope are advancing solutions to these problems with digital scholarship.

The first is our *American Religious Ecologies* project, the main activity of which is digitizing the 1926 Census of Religious Bodies.[20] The 1926 census is the only one of the federal religious censuses for which the schedules are extant—some 230,000 individual forms. Thanks to the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and although hampered by the closure of the National Archives due to the pandemic, we have thus far digitized over 40,000 schedules. We have been transcribing the digitized schedules into datasets and using those datasets to publish interactive, interpretative maps. With the help of our advisory board and other scholars, we are seeking ways to redress the most obvious shortcomings of the way that the federal census categorized and counted religion.[21] We are trying to reframe these datasets in a way that the federal census did not anticipate to make them useful for the scholarly purposes of the field.

Finally I will mention my digital monograph, *America's Public Bible*. While a prototype version has been available for a number of years, a much fuller version, featuring better visualizations and interpretative prose, will be published soon by Stanford University Press. This project seeks to advance interpretative claims about the use of the Bible in American newspaper on the basis of computational research using a machine-learning model which identified quotations across millions of newspaper pages. The goal is to achieve a view of one particular aspect of American religion at a scale inaccessible to conventional research: in other words to be able to move from a bird's eye view down to all the microscopic. It seeks to open up an interpretative method which I am calling disciplined serendipity, by identifying an impossibly large number of (truly strange) quotations from the Bible, but setting them in the twin contexts of change over time, represented by the trends in rates of quotation, and the context in the newspaper page.[22]

There are many more interesting projects in the field which are doing this work of creating useful and rigorous digital scholarship that I have had to leave out due to space, but any more examples would only further demonstrate my thesis.

What does teaching have to do with this, especially teaching online during a pandemic? Teaching is an important driver in getting the field to accept digital scholarship. Let me make three observations about the relationship between teaching and scholarship.

First, we teach the scholarship we find most useful, and so we tend to value the works we teach as scholarship. Something has to be truly useful and accessible to get on my

syllabi, and so I think of it as the most interesting work that is being done in the field.

But second, online materials are increasingly more likely to find their way on to syllabi. This change is because students are comfortable with digital sources, because of increased concerns about textbook costs, and because of the difficulty of providing access to library materials during a pandemic. Browsing the collection of syllabi hosted by the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, for instance, I see a huge increase in digital materials being assigned. This is especially the case with pandemic syllabi, some of which foreswore book purchases entirely. Digital humanities scholars tend to have an open-access ethos, and so their materials are almost by definition open educational resources.

Third, teaching increasingly is emphasizing assignments other than the standard paper, whether that is "unessays," digital maps, or podcast creation.[23] As we grow more comfortable assigning digital assignments to our students, we grow more comfortable creating them in our own scholarship.

So looking to the future, will monographs and journal articles go away? Of course not. They are genuinely useful forms of scholarship. Will the digital humanities as a field go away? Of course not. DH is too well integrated into the structure of the modern university and fundraising environments to disappear.

But I do expect that digital scholarship with that adjective *digital* will lose its novelty as it gains in utility. I expect that scholars in American religion will resolve the key difficulties with digital media that are holding back the usefulness of digital scholarship. And having worked through the problems of form, method, and interpretation as it relates to digital scholarship, I expect that in time we will just drop the word *digital* and be left only with *scholarship*. And that will be a good thing, because we will have a wider array of forms and methods with which to pursue our study of the weightier matters that animate the field of American religion.

---

[1] Ben Schmidt, "'Peer Review' Is Younger Than You Think," *Sapping Attention*, 15 September 2017: http://sappingattention.blogspot.com/2017/09/peer-review-is-younger-than-you-think.html.

[2] Even print media are now digital. Note that many journals, including the journal *Religion and American Culture*, published by our hosts at CSRAAC and IUPUI, and the *Journal of Social History*, housed in my own department of History and Art History at GMU, retain the form of print scholarship but are in fact digital-only publications.

[3] Matthew Kirschenbaum, "Digital Humanities As/Is a

Tactical Term," *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2012* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), ch. 23: https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled-88c11800-9446-469b-a3be-3fdb36bfbd1e/section/c0b0a8ee-95f0-4a9c-9451-e8ad168e3db5.

4 Arguing with Digital History working group, "Digital History and Argument," white paper, Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (13 November 2017): https://rrchnm.org/argument-white-paper/.

5 By way of analogy, have you ever heard a scholar proudly proclaim that they are a "print historian" because they published a book?

6 Of course, specific technologies enable those specific genres. For example, WordPress has enable the blog, Omeka has enabled the digital collection, and StoryMaps have enabled, well, the story or narrative map as a genre.

7 Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, "If It's South Dakota You Must Be Episcopalian: Lies, Truth-Telling, and the Mapping of U.S. Religion," *Church History* 71, no. 1 (2002): 132–42. On the problem in history more generally, see Jessica Marie Johnson, "Markup Bodies: Black [Life] Studies and Slavery [Death] Studies at the Digital Crossroads," *Social Text* 36, no. 4 (2018): 57–79, https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-7145658.

8 Michael J. Altman, Jerome Copulsky, et al., *Uncivil Religion: January 6, 2021* (University of Alabama, 2021): https://uncivilreligion.org/.

9 Rachel Wheeler and Sarah Eyerly, "Singing Box 331: Re-sounding Eighteenth-Century Mohican Hymns from the Moravian Archives," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 76, no. 4 (2019): 649–96. See the digital version at https://oieahc.wm.edu/digital-projects/oi-reader/singing-box-331-rachel-wheeler-sarah-eyerly/.

10 *Places, Perspectives: African American Community-Building in Tennessee, 1860–1920* (Middle Tennessee State University): https://digital.mtsu.edu/digital/collection/p15838coll17.

11 *American Religious Sounds Project* (Ohio State University): http://religioussounds.osu.edu/.

12 W. Paul Reeve, et al., *Century of Black Mormons* (J . Willard Marriot Library, University of Utah): https://exhibits.lib.utah.edu/s/century-of-black-mormons/. See also W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

13 Kristian Petersen, *Directions in the Study of Religion*: https://themarginaliareview.com/category/interviews/mrb-radio/directions-in-the-study-of-religion/; Amanda Furiasse and Sher Afgan Tareen, *The Religion and Cities Podcast*: https://www.religionandcities.org/podcast; Megan Goodwin and Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst, *Keeping It 101: A*

Killjoy's Introduction to Religion: https://keepingit101.com.

14 Rise Gelles-Watnick and Andrew Perrin, "Who Doesn't Read Books in America?" Pew Research Center, 21 September 2021: https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/09/21/who-doesnt-read-books-in-america/.

15 Among these contributions are the series of books on deep mapping, the most recent of which is David J. Bodenhamer, John Corrigan, and Trevor M. Harris, eds., *Making Deep Maps: Foundations, Approaches, and Methods* (Routledge, 2022).

16 Marilyn J. Chiat and Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *Houses of Worship in the Twin Cities, 1849–1924* (University of Minnesota): https://housesofworship.umn.edu/.

17 Harold D. Morales, et al., *Mapping Religion and Cities* (Center for the Study of Religion and the City, Morgan State University): https://www.religionandcities.org/maps; Nicole Meyers Turner, et al., *Mapping Black Religion* (Virginia Commonwealth University AltLab): https://mappingblackreligion.com.

18 Jeri Wieringa, "A Gospel of Health and Salvation: Modeling the Religious Culture of Seventh-day Adventism, 1843–1920" (PhD dissertation, George Mason University, 2019): http://dissertation.jeriwieringa.com.

19 Jannelle Legg, "'With Eloquent Fingers He Preached': The Protestant Episcopal Mission to the Deaf" (PhD dissertation, George Mason University, 2021): https://scholarship.rrchnm.org/legg-dissertation/.

20 *American Religious Ecologies*, Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, George Mason University (2018–): http://religiousecologies.org.

21 As an example, see John G. Turner, "'Negro Baptists' in the U.S. Census of Religious Bodies," *American Religious Ecologies*, 28 May 2021: https://religiousecologies.org/blog/negro-baptists-in-the-u.s.-census-of-religious-bodies/.

22 Lincoln Mullen, *America's Public Bible: A Commentary* (Stanford University Press, forthcoming): https://americaspublicbible.org/; Lincoln Mullen "The Making of America's Public Bible: Computational Text Analysis for Religious History," in *Digital Humanities and Research Methods in Religious Studies: An Introduction*, edited by Christopher D. Cantwell and Kristian Petersen (DeGruyter, 2021), 31–52, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110573022-003.

23 Abigail Mullen, "Making a Podcast in Your Class," *The American Historian*, December 2021: https://www.oah.org/tah/issues/2021/immigration-history/making-a-podcast-in-your-class/.

Hussein Rashid
Independent Scholar

I need to be up front as to how I'm using my time. This presentation is a chance to reflect and think through with bright minds what is next in the representation of religions. It is a reflection and process paper. This talk is about education, more so than pedagogy, but education outside of the classroom. I firmly believe that our students are our first public, and when we take teaching seriously, we are invested in public scholarship as an integral part of the professorial mandate.[1]

This particular paper will focus on education through museums. It will include reflections on work I have done in museums, in order to get us to a point of discussing what can and does the digital enable. I will start by thinking about the digital humanities, how it got me thinking about museums, and returning to the potential of digital and material experiences, and now incorporating immaterial culture and role of people.

Digital Humanities and Religious Studies

Several years ago I co-authored a report with Chris Cantwell for the SSRC called "Religion, Media, and the Digital Turn." It was, primarily, about what the digital humanities means in and for the Study of Religion.[2] Towards the end of the report we raise a series of thoughts about what the future may bring. These thoughts are in the context of authority and authorization, pointing out the ways our discipline is premised on authorization, not authority, to continuously reinscribe colonial power structures.

We posit that the preference of the academy for sole authored monographs contributes to the maintenance of these power structures, and that digital humanities projects destabilize the emphasis on authorization. For DH projects, collaboration and iteration are key philosophical underpinnings of the work, and thus move from the colonial model of authoritarianism.

We write in the report:

> One can imagine publications that are multidisciplinary and multi-layered, such as the living history of a particular site like Touba, Senegal. Built around a vision of Ahmadou Bamba, and ultimately his burying place, one can construct a presentation of the city through digital scholarship that covers architecture, urban design, history, hagiography, music, clothing, dance, etc. The core only needs to be built out by a small group, which then invites other contributors to build on the

> site, thus making it a multivocal, multilinear study of religion that more closely approximates how religion functions in the world.

> By focusing on a multi-sensory approach to faith, the limits of the original construction of study of religion become clear. …

> Some potential directions involve thinking about religious practice, particularly when it has not or cannot be recorded; religious literacy; civilizational webs; non-linear temporal thinking; and spatial thinking. By moving away from text-centric approach, not only can academics supplement scriptural bases with aspects of lived religion, but can also structure ways of capturing non-text religions, where an oral tradition dominates, or itinerancy limits the ability to preserve artifacts.[3]

[TLDR: The Study of Religion is a colonial discipline and digital humanities offers one vehicle for breaking the structures of the discipline.]

Religion and Museums

My personal chance to experiment with what we wrote in that report came when I had an opportunity to work with the Children's Museum of Manhattan on an exhibit called *America to Zanzibar: Muslim Cultures Near and Far*. Unlike "grown-up" art object museums like The Met, children's museums are more experientially play oriented. At the same time, children don't come to these museums by themselves, but with caregivers, so the audience is dual, and teaching strategies must therefore be explicitly dual.

The AtoZ exhibit became a sandbox to experiment with the theory from the report. The content around Islam was framed through religious literacy, particularly the elements of religious diversity, and the interplay between religion and culture.

We broke up the exhibit into thematic areas, such as travel. The trade area was a grand bazaar with stalls from different areas of the world were put next to each other, and in unexpected ways. So we had a Zanzibari fish market, a Turkish ceramic stall, and an Egyptian spice store. We also had the Dushanbe teahouse in Boulder, CO, and clothing from Petit Senegal in Harlem, NY.

The children, through their play, did something that embodied the learning we hoped for: they took fish from

Zanzibar, put them on Turkish plates, dressed in Senegalese-style clothing, and had lunch in the only Central Asian teahouse in the U.S.. They experienced trade and interaction, and did not consider it religious, while experiencing what it is Muslims do. It demonstrated to their caregivers the overdetermination of religion in how the U.S. generally understands Islam.

This sort of experiential play is not usually seen in art museums. Although as "Islamic art" galleries — and I'm only focusing on Islamic art here — get renovated and refurbished in encyclopedic museums like The Met or The British Museum they are engaging more with contextual experiences. For example, The Met in their new galleries built a Moroccan courtyard, which often hosts musicians. Yet, the question remains how that context is simply not an addition to the type of Western voyeurism of art objects that simply reinforces the Orientalist gaze.

I'll point to the work of people like Wendy Shaw, Mirjam Shatanawi, and Crispin Paine for more detailed discussions of the construction of art and the alienating effecting of calling a religious object art.[4] And of course, Dan Hicks book on the role of colonialism in the very construction of museums is important to seeing how the worst of religious studies and museology reinforce one another.[5] In a short chapter I wrote about Islam in museums, integrating this work on museology, I revisit the potential of digital technologies to affect how we can imagine a more comprehensive and less colonial vision of representing other people. I come back to Touba and suggest:

> An interdisciplinary and comparative approach to cultural objects seems like an ideal place to leverage the power of digital technologies in service of the humanities. Digital tools offer us the ability to layer different types of knowledge with a particular thematic focus. For example, we could spotlight Touba, Senegal, and conduct an analysis of the biography and hagiography of the famous Sufi master, Cheikh Ahamadou Bamba (1853– 1927), layered over a digital map of his travels. Doing so would allow us to connect the establishment of his tomb and the growth of the city around it. Going further, we could link this history to the rich musical traditions that emerge from the various Sufi orders that lay claim to Bamba's spiritual legacy. The annual pilgrimage to Touba, commemorating Bamba's passing, would add another sensory experience to our understanding of the city. There are also mystical readings of the location of the city that become important to understanding its central role in the life of believers and the ways in which Touba was designed. For an

> additional layer of complexity, a digital construct of this world could trace the members of the various Sufi orders linked to Ahmadou Bamba as they move about the world, exploring the new social and aesthetic structures they create to achieve similar ethical ends. Street peddlers in New York, or the Bamba Parade in Harlem, offer salient examples of the continuing, evolving culture of these diasporic Sufi communities.

> This type of comprehensive narration— augmented through the use of digital tools—forces a discussion about the connection between visual and cultural (re)presentations of Muslims. It demonstrates the complexity of Islamic cultures and offers a way to think of the term "Islamic" in more comprehensive ways than simply through text or object. Such a multi-dimensional and multisensorial mapping of a Muslim community would illustrate how culture permeates all aspects of life and reveal the role of ritual as a vital part of that culture.[6]

[TLDR: Museums are sites of colonial violence, and can also serve as sites for increased religious literacy, subverting the colonial legacies of both Religious Studies and museology.]

Get to the Point: What's Next?

It may seem that my point is that we just keep iterating around Touba. While I am not opposed to doing that, it is in fact not my point. Rather, it's about pointing out what the iteration of an exhibit around Touba reveals around the limits of digital interventions in teaching.

You'll note, I hope, that when I spoke about the AtoZ exhibit, that I mentioned not overdetermining the role of religion, but in that process, there is a risk of undetermining the role of religion, in a way similar to art museums. We mitigated that by having Muslims speaking about their religious identity and understanding. Audio recordings supplemented objects that we had on display. That sort of connection is obviously thin and aspirational, although in a small space of AtoZ of about 3000 sq. ft. it is not unreasonable. And having done the audio recordings, I have to wonder if that sort of intervention adds enough complexity and context, not just in terms of content, but in terms of form.

The thing I keep coming back to is the place of people, not just in recordings or videos, but in their presence. AtoZ, at its best, worked when children of religious or ethnic heritage in the space were playing with kids who were not

from a shared background. The first set of children could speak to their own experiences in ways that were appropriate for the moment, because they were responsive to the situation at hand.

This, of course, brings to mind one of the primary intervention of Birmingham school of cultural studies. It's about the people.

The versioning of Touba I have depends on continuing to assume that we in religious studies and/or museology still have the ability to authorize who gets to speak and how. The digital makes context more accessible and reproducible, and we can weaken colonial models without abandoning them. So the next iteration I propose for my Touba exhibit is to add people.

We are making strides in multiple disciplines with the engagement of communities we study, whether is community-based learning or advisory boards. But for this iteration, I'm thinking of something more comprehensive. At the very least, co-creation and presence. There is no better way to give context to an object than to see it being used; to watch it live outside of its glass case. (And for those worried about the capitalist implication of letting expensive things out into the wild, we can use analog objects, because many of these objects do continue to be used.) I think the space of Touba looks very different from my vantage point than that of a member of the Mouridiyya.

But the least is not what should be on offer. My modest proposal is to cede space and resources, and offer ourselves as the secondary partner, if we are invited. The Mourides can plan, organize, and display their experiences that demonstrate the living nature of the people, the religion, and the objects.

[TLDR: It's about the people. The digital has to be second.]

Conclusion

For those of you familiar with Freire and hooks, what I'm about to say is not new.[7] Teaching can be a liberatory act, not just for our students, but for us. In working to create alignment between what we teach and how we teach, there has to be a continuous move towards centering the human experience and the experience of being human. This idea of teaching is not limited to the classroom environment, but extends out to other spaces of education, including museums. The digital is simply a way to break the norms that keep us from imagining what else may be possible.

[TLDR: Don't add to the dumpster fire.]

Hussein Rashid, eds. *Teaching Critical Religious Studies: Pedagogy and Critique in the Classroom* New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.

[2] Cantwell, Chris, and Hussein Rashid. *Religion, Media, and the Digital Turn*. New York: Social Science Research Council, 2015.

[3] Ibid, 39-40.

[4] Shaw, Wendy M. K. *What is "Islamic" Art?: Between Religion and Perception*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019; Shatanawi, Mirjam. "Curating Against Dissent: Museums and the Public Debate on Islam." In *Political and Cultural Representations of Muslims: Islam in the Plural*, edited by Christopher Flood, Stephen Hutchings, Galina Miazhevich, and Henri Nickels, 177–92. Boston: Brill, 2012; Paine, Crispin. *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties*. London; New York: Berg Publishers, 2013.

[5] Hicks, Dan. *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*. London: Pluto Press, 2020.

[6] Hussein, Rashid. "Defining Islamic Art: Practices and Digital Reconfigurations." In *Cyber Muslims: Mapping Islamic Digital Media in the Internet Age*, edited by Robert Rozehnal, 191–202. New York: Bloomsbury, 2022, pg. 201.

[7] Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 1993; hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

[1] See Gray-Hildenbrand, Jenna, Beverley McGuire, and

Reproductive Rights

As we await the SCOTUS decision on Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, a decision that has the potential to overturn Roe v. Wade, we turn to the complex history of religion and reproductive rights and reproductive justice in the United States. When we think about the relationship between religion and reproductive rights in the U.S., we tend to think of them in opposition. In what ways is this perception accurate? Inaccurate? If reproductive justice focuses on the right to have or not have children, why have reproductive rights tended to focus on the right to not have children? Do different religions have different takes on reproductive rights? What are some of the ways that religious restrictions on reproductive health shape our society that people may not be readily aware of?

Tricia Bruce
University of Notre Dame

Maria doesn't like talking about abortion.[1] It's not comfortable. She sees it as "this big folder, I guess, just kind of sitting there." Working for her Catholic parish as secretary and baptism coordinator, she approaches people knowing that everyone is a little bit wounded. That's what it means to treat each person with dignity, she says.

Maria identifies as "pro-life" but doesn't consider herself an activist. She prays and shares answers "as the Church teaches." On a committee regarding a parish pro-life display, Maria once asked if they could introduce components such as care for the elderly, living conditions, or how we treat each other. "The answer I received was, 'No, we can't.' So, I was like —Okay. That's okay." She says that—as a Catholic—there's "a lot riding" on the abortion issue—it's the "hot button issue right now" for the Church.

She imagines abortion taking "a toll on the mother, regardless of whether they know it right at that moment or not." Maria doesn't want loudspeakers or shaming. But she does wish to ban abortion outright. In her estimation, "as a society, we don't like to suffer. …But we fail to realize that there might also be joy with that suffering." "It's just this really big, messy issue."

Preston has always been drawn to listening to people's stories, and people are likewise drawn to him. This explains why one of his close high school friends years ago confided in him after she terminated her pregnancy. "She didn't have anybody else to talk to," he recalled:

> I was just sad for her. I wasn't sad that, you know, all the stuff you hear—'that a baby had been killed' or 'a life had ended.' I was sad for her—that she had been put in this position. …This colored me after that, that the main reason that she had the abortion was because she felt like her church and her parents would disown her if she got pregnant and wasn't married.

Now a pastor, himself, Preston faults a failed civic and religious discourse for making the issue more political than personal, an "insensitive" approach that "makes [women] feel like they can't be honest with the people that they love the most." He says it's "as if there aren't human beings attached to these big decisions that government or churches are trying to make. …And that brings me great pain."

It's personal for Preston, too, as his wife—like a quarter of U.S. women by age 45—has had an abortion.[2] Preston bristles at the irony underlying labels like "pro-life," describing many who adhere to it as more like "pro-birth"—"their care for that child ends the moment the child comes out of the uterus." His sees his own denomination "left out" in national conversations and longs for a "third way" to talk about abortion. "I'm just missing that more moderate voice."

We are in a moment with abortion in America. A loud, contentious, high stakes moment interwoven with the religious fabric of the United States…but in ways less straightforward than those most commonly observed.

Having led a team of sociologists in conducting hundreds of qualitative, in-depth interviews with a randomly selected, closely representative sample of Americans,[3] I want to share three somewhat confounding findings regarding the complex intersections of religion and abortion opinion in the U.S. today…today—on the cusp of what is likely to be a monumental ruling from the U.S. Supreme Court.

 # 1: There is no single "religious view" on abortion. Nor are there two clearly labeled and parsed American views on abortion, neatly divided by religion.

Some years ago, sociologist Kristin Luker concluded from extensive interviews with abortion activists that belief in God was a key divider between "a pro-choice" and "pro-life" position. A pro-life position, she deduced, "centers around God"; a pro-choice position does not.[4]

But decades have passed, religion and religious culture in America have changed, and activists are not the same as ordinary Americans. The sheer empirical reality that wide majorities of Americans believe in God itself complicates such a simple dividing line on abortion opinion.[5]

Some Americans we interviewed described a God who designs, plans, oversees, and intervenes. Humans who choose abortion "play god," they don't "trust God," they aren't following "God's rules." But other Americans we interviewed described a God who works alongside humans as they navigate difficult real life scenarios and do the best they can. As one interviewee put it, "I think that God hands you chips and you have to just play them the best way you can."

A shared religious affiliation starts to pattern views on abortion, to be sure. Such as the ways that Evangelical interviewees alluded to a "reason" that each baby is conceived; or pregnancies as "gifts" from God with a "spirit" that enters right away; or the "consequences" that follow a decision to have sex. Or Mainline Protestant interviewees who held religion in one hand and science in another, often with little clarity as to where their own denomination stood. We heard Jewish Americans explain their support for legal access through the lens of Judaism as

a "mother faith," and nonreligious Americans, many of whom felt perfectly comfortable without clear and absolute answers, leaning on individual discretion and the law to sort things out.

But even within shared religious traditions, we heard something far from a singular view on abortion. Some Catholics, for example, saw no room for legal abortion whatsoever; others distinguished between what "felt right" for themselves as a Catholic versus a "right" for someone else holding a different view; still others saw no connection to their faith whatsoever—such as one interviewee who said of links between her abortion views and her religion, "not much, 'cuz I don't think [my views] line up with Catholicism."

Many religious Americans' views on abortion don't align neatly with stances espoused by religious elites, even from their own tradition. While the language and framing may look similar, experiences, vantage points, and interpersonal relationships vary widely, generating disparate positions. Americans with the loudest voices are not always the most representative ones.

#2: Absolutist positions opposing abortion are more aptly articulated and available to religious Americans than positions that make room for distinction, support, or ambivalence.

Religious Americans who ardently oppose abortion are readily supplied with religious messaging and reasoning to bolster arguments, clarify positions, and mobilize support. This is, arguably, a sign of successful mobilization by the religious right, well documented by historians and political scientists.

But this lop-sided success lends itself also to what might be called mass confusion among Americans who hold simultaneously to their faith and to support for access to abortion, or who find themselves unwilling to adhere to an absolute position.

Institutional and personal ironies sew confusion, as well:

- Religious messaging that reveres motherhood when the majority of abortion seekers are already mothers—many of whom describe choosing between abortion and parenthood rather than abortion and adoption.[6]
- Religious messaging that admonishes and stigmatizes an abortion decision when a majority of abortion seekers identify as religious, themselves.[7]
- Religious messaging that decries inequality when abortion rates are highest among persons of color, when finances are the top-cited reason for choosing abortion, and when the overwhelming majority of U.S. congregations remain monoracial.[8]
- Religious messaging that adheres to absolutes amid religious adherents who do not.

What to do, caught in this liminal space where absolutes fail?

Many religious Americans whose views differ from and complicate those of their own traditions are left instead to use religion as a static foil against which to compare themselves. Interviewees point out how they disagree, balance other values, look to multiple sources of authority, or trust their own consciousness—all while setting up moral discernment as something that occurs outside and alongside a "religious" view, rather than inside of it.

Where, then, do Americans go to think through these issues and have these conversations? This leads to a third takeaway from interviewing hundreds of Americans regarding abortion:

#3 Religious arenas are largely failing in their ability to foster productive moral conversations on abortion, conflating legality and morality in ways that make it difficult to sort through its complex personal and social dimensions.

Most everyday Americans—whether or not they affiliate with religion—do treat abortion as a "religious" question. It's rendered meaningful, important, deeply human, and often lacking easy or even desirable answers. It's the kind of mystery that science cannot resolve, as recent SCOTUS hearings remind us. Three-quarters of our interviewees felt some degree of moral opposition to abortion. Far more Americans express moral reservations about abortion than they do legal ones.

But instead of cultivating safe and productive spaces for conversation on abortion at the intersection of ideals and realities, Americans tend to depict religious organizations as homogenized, commandeered by politics and ideological partisanship, and thereby less suitable (or safe) to engage the topic at all—particularly when personal views or experiences challenge the rubric.

If not in and through religion, where do those conversations go?

Legal positions on abortion may look like proxies for moral ones, but many Americans treat them differently. Debating legal access to abortion need not rely upon silencing conversations regarding morality. But this gets lost in the cacophony of public debates as religious leaders miss opportunities to build bridges from morality to legality without conflating the two. Perceptions of a "pro-choice" / "pro-life" dichotomy—paired with an uneasy blend of moral and legal views—drown out room for more honest and productive discussions about abortion.

Religion and religious actors are integral to the abortion conversation in America, now more than ever. But pretending as though there is a singular religious view, mobilizing messaging accordingly, and opting out of moral conversations in the interest of legal ones—means that

religion and abortion in the U.S. will continue to reach a stalemate, marked by politics, stigma, and silence.

---

[1] A pseudonym. All interviewees come from the *National Abortion Attitudes Study* (NAAS).

[2] Jones, Rachel K. and Jenna Jerman, "Population Group Abortion Rates and Lifetime Incidence of Abortion: United States, 2008-2014." *American Journal of Public Health* (2017):107(12):1904-1909.

[3] Bruce, Tricia C. *How Americans Understand Abortion.* (2020) Available https://news.nd.edu/assets/395804/how_americans_underst and_abortion_final_7_15_20.pdf

[4] Luker, Kristin. *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

[5] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/25/key-findings-about-americans-belief-in-god/

[6] Kortsmit, Katherine, Tara C. Jatlaoui, Michele G. Mandel, Jennifer A. Reeves, Titilope Oduyebo, Emily Petersen, Maura K. Whiteman. "Abortion Surveillance—United States, 2018." *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report: Surveillance Summaries* (2020) 69(7):1-29; Sisson G, Ralph L, Gould H, Foster DG. "Adoption Decision Making among Women Seeking Abortion." (2017) Womens Health Issues. Mar-Apr;27(2):136-144.

[7] Jerman, Jenna, Rachel K. Jones, and Tsuyoshi Onda. *Characteristics of U.S. Abortion Patients in 2014 and Changes Since 2008.* (2016) New York, NY: Guttmacher Institute.

[8] Ibid; Biggs, M. Antonia, Heather Gould, and Diana Greene Foster. "Understanding Why Women Seek Abortions in the US." *BMC Women's Health* (2013) 13(29):1-13.; https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/fact-2020-survey/

Samira K. Mehta[1]
Colorado University, Boulder

Today, headlines inform us that with Roe under threat, conservative Christians and the political right will next set their sights on birth control. Yet as access to both abortion and contraception comes under threat, the vast majority of Americans use or have used some form of contraception. Their actions are supported by longstanding pastoral advocacy on the issue. My current project researches the Protestant, Jewish, and even occasionally Catholic leaders, who campaigned to make contraception widely acceptable, in the mid-20th century. (Just as a side note, I am happy to get into the Catholic story during Q&A, but here will be focusing on the Protestants and Jews.)

As new contraceptive options emerged in the first two-thirds of the 20th century, from the diaphragm to the birth control pill, Protestant leaders wrestled with what to think. Many came to see birth control as a moral good that would allow married couples to have satisfying sex lives, while protecting women from the health risks of frequent pregnancies. They hoped it could ensure that couples would not have more children than they could care for, emotionally and economically.

They looked inward, considering the consequences of birth control for their own communities, and hoped that "planned" or "responsible" sex would create healthy families and decrease divorce. They also looked outward, thinking about birth control's wider implications, at a time of widespread concern that the global population was rising too quickly to handle.

By the time the pill came on the market in the 1960s, liberal and even some conservative Protestants were advocating for birth control using new theological ideas about "responsible parenthood." "Responsible parenthood" reframed debates about family size around "Christian duty." To be responsible in parenting was not only to avoid having more children than you could afford, nurture and educate. It also meant considering responsibilities outside the home toward churches, society and humanity.

Protestant leaders supporting contraception argued that the best kind of family was a father with a steady job and a homemaker mother, and that birth control could encourage this model, because smaller families could maintain a comfortable lifestyle on one income. They also hoped that contraception would help couples stay together by allowing them to have satisfying sex lives.

Multiple denominations endorsed birth control. In 1958, for example, the Anglican Communion stated that family planning was a "primary obligation of Christian marriage," and chastised parents "who carelessly and improvidently bring children into the world, trusting in an unknown future or a generous society to care for them." While the Catholic Church had come out with a strong statement against birth control in 1930 and would do so

again in 1968, responsible parenthood, as a theology, would appeal to many Catholic religious and laity, both for the reasons articulated above and for more political, and sometimes problematic, reasons that I will address shortly, but first, the Jews:

The Jewish perspective was a bit different. Jewish law has long found birth control essentially acceptable, with references in the Talmud to both drinkable forms of contraception and to something often translated as a "contraceptive tampon." (We are not totally sure what such a thing was, or how it worked, but there it is.) Jewish law specifies that sex is an obligation of marriage. (In fact, no less than Alan Guttmacher, president of Planned Parenthood, wrote a piece for the journal Judaism pointing out that rabbinic teaching specifies how often a man must sleep with his wife, based on profession—camel traders are given lower requirements, because of travel, than someone expected to stay put.) Jewish law also specifies that life, in this case the life of the woman, is to be protected. So, if one is in a situation in which a woman's health would be harmed by pregnancy, but one cannot reasonably expect the couple to sacrifice sex, contraception is allowed. This means that while internal Jewish debates about contraception varied by historical moment, geographic location, and form of Judaism, they tended not to focus on whether contraception was permitted but rather 1) which kinds of contraception were acceptable and 2) when it was acceptable to use contraception. If anyone is curious about the details of these debates, please ask during the Q&A.

This broader context meant a couple of things for Jewish engagement in mid-century debates about birth control. In a context in which Jews were becoming voices in a "Judeo-Christian" or "tri-faith" American conversation, they were often doing so by being collapsed into mainline Protestant voices, and concern about this is reflected in how Jews engaged with birth control debates—while they were pro-contraception, along with their mainline allies, they wanted to very clearly distinguish themselves from Protestants as well.

Jewish leaders (both clergy and Jewish doctors) were quick to point out that, Christianity's take of "it is better to marry than to burn" allows for sex but is not really what we would call "sex positive." Jewish leaders wanted to make it clear that Judaism was distinct from Christianity in that they had different, and long standing reasons to support birth control. In Addition, Jewish leadership, particularly those in the conservative movement, were eager to demonstrate that even Jews who were committed to Jewish law were part of a religion with "modern" sensibilities—perhaps even more modern than their Christian counterparts.

Religious leaders' support for "responsible parenthood" was not just about deliberately creating the kind

of Christian families they approved of or living in accordance with Jewish law. It was also about heading off the horrors of population explosion—a fear very much front of mind in mid-century America.

In the middle of the 20th century, with increased access to vaccines and antibiotics, more children were living to adulthood and life expectancies were rising. Protestant leaders feared this so-called population bomb would outstrip the Earth's food supply, leading to famine and war.

In 1954, when the global population stood at about 2.5 billion, Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the most prominent Protestant voices of the age, framed overpopulation as one of the world's "basic problems," and the birth control pill, which was then being developed, as the best potential solution.

Richard Figley, a minister who served on the World Council of Churches' Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, argued that in family planning, science had provided Christians with a new venue for moral responsibility. Medical knowledge, Figley wrote, is "a liberating gift from God, to be used to the glory of God, in accordance with his will for men."

These "responsible parenthood" ideas held that religious couples had a responsibility to be good stewards of the earth by not having more children than the planet could support. In the context of marriage, contraception was viewed as moral, shoring up a particular form of Christian values. Again, this was a value that resonated with many Catholics as well.

All of that said, these ideas about "good" and "bad" families often rested on assumptions about race and gender that reproductive rights advocates find troubling today. Early in the 20th century, predominantly white, Protestant clergy were very interested in increasing access to contraception for the poor, who were often Catholic or Jewish immigrants or people of color. Some scholars have argued that early support for contraception was predominantly about eugenics, particularly before World War II. Among some white leaders, there was concern about so-called race suicide: the racist fear that "they" would be overwhelmed.

Apart from some eugenicists, however, most of these clergy wanted to give people access to contraception in order to create "healthy" families, regardless of income level. Yet many were unable or unwilling to see how they were promoting a narrow view of the ideal family, and how that marginalized poor communities and people of color— themes I am studying in my current book project.

Moreover, many proponents were advocating for women's health, but not reproductive freedom. Their priority was setting women up for success to attain their ideal of the middle-class, Christian motherhood. With fewer children, some hoped, families would be able to get by on just a husband's salary, meaning more women at home raising children. The fact that their logics were not feminist

would become clear when women used birth control to further their educations and careers, and as birth control became more acceptable outside of marriage—more conservative Christians would temper (and in some cases) withdraw their support for contraception—both supporting abstinence only educational and in many cases making culture war bedfellows with anti-choice Catholics and working to cut funding for "family planning," a term that linked birth control and abortion. Even in progressive Jewish groups, and in Jewish Studies scholarship of the 1970s, the feminist potential of the pill would cause increased panic about Jewish continuity, as Jewish leaders—including some prominent feminist voices, such as Blu Greenberg—a leader in the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, worried that Jewish women were using contraception to delay childbearing, such that the Jewish birth rate would fall.

Given these concerns, and some other changes—a decrease in fears about growing population, which have only recently been re-awoken by the climate crisis, for instance, many leaders stopped actively defending birth control— some because they saw the battle as largely won, with abortion the women's rights battle ground, others because they were dismayed at some of the implications of birth control more broadly.

Contemporary reproductive justice is not only about the right to avoid pregnancy but also about the right to raise children in healthy environments, be those schools free of guns, water pipes free of lead, or families with the number of children that the parents can reasonably care for. While these ideas seem like radical changes to the reproductive rights agenda, they have been part of the conversation all along—the important question is who is deciding what it means to raise a healthy family. While the mid-century voices were powerful white men, extending their understanding of healthy families, today reproductive justice centers on the voices of women of color. But what work do we do when we pull this emphasis on using technology to have agency to shape families?

In addition, what would it mean for liberal clergy to reclaim their voices as the front and center of the reproductive rights debate? That, I think, we will shortly see.

---

[1] A previous version of the sections of this paper pertaining to Protestantism were published in The Conversation on May 24, 2022.

Religious Freedom in the Age of Pandemic

Religious freedom is the rallying cry for many who resist state pressure to accept prevailing social norms. Some religious employers claim exemption from providing insurance that underwrites access to abortion. Some individuals and businesses resist being required to participate in gay marriages. Most recently, a large number of Americans claim religious exemption from any kind of vaccine mandate. Why have claims of religious conscience become such a bastion for resistance and refusal? How does the idea of religious freedom shape the narrative around American religion and its relationship to individualism, consumerism, and market capitalism?

Tisa Wenger
Yale Divinity School

Religious freedom has long been a rallying cry in the United States, shaping public discourse along with our underlying ideas about what counts as 'religion.' My comments today will focus on the cultural politics of the religious freedom disputes that developed directly in and around the COVID-19 pandemic. A quick survey of online news and commentary—which I did in preparation for this talk—confirms my memory that two significant pandemic-related issues were framed in religious freedom terms. First came the opposition to state-mandated bans on large public gatherings, including worship services. More recently, some folks have claimed exemptions to vaccine mandates on religious freedom grounds. I want to think with you especially about the former: the protests and court cases that were sparked by temporary closures and restrictions on places of worship along with other places where large numbers of people gather.

I am not a lawyer and do not intend to propose the "right" way to adjudicate such cases. Rather, I bring the perspective of a historian, asking about the kinds of cultural and political work that religious freedom talk performs. In my view, the pandemic only intensified and exacerbated several ongoing trends. For some years now, religious freedom, both in public discourse and in the courts, has come to be associated primarily with the concerns of right-wing Christians and with the culture wars of white Christian nationalists. Much of this is not new: as my own scholarship has shown, this ideal often served imperial and majoritarian white Christian interests in earlier periods of U.S. history. But I do think it has entered a new phase.

The preponderance of religious freedom talk today intensifies a political configuration in which the weighty but slippery category, "religion"—which slips easily from an apparent inclusivity into references that clearly privilege Christianity—is positioned against the perceived threat of secularism, and against a Democratic Party that is portrayed as irredeemably irreligious and therefore anti-American. During the early months of the pandemic, right-wing media featured dramatic images of worship services being halted, churches and sometimes synagogues actually being closed, by order of the state. For many conservative Christians—and for some ultra-Orthodox Jews—these events and images only seemed to intensify pre-existing narratives about a growing threat to religious freedom at the hands of the secular state.

Conservative commentary on this topic not infrequently began with the Pilgrims. An article on Fox News.com, in November 2020, opened this way: "The powerful desire for religious freedom goes back to ancient times. We celebrated it on Thanksgiving when we marked 400 years since the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock to escape religious persecution." The main point of this piece was to applaud a Supreme Court decision that had just

stopped New York from enforcing its strict limits on occupancy "for churches, synagogues, mosques, and other houses of worship.[1] The increasingly conservative court appears here as religion's savior from the threats posed by a secular or even anti-religious state. In his recent book *City on the Hill*, Abram Van Engen has shown how narratives about the Pilgrims have tended to place a particular kind of religious freedom—above all, for white Christians—at the heart of American exceptionalism. Stories about the Pilgrims, in other words, continue to perpetuate much older narratives that naturalize Manifest Destiny, the idea that white Christian settlers had and still have a God-given right to this land.[2]

Similar rhetoric appeared in various court rulings by conservative judges who linked American identity not only to the Pilgrims but to a much longer history of persecuted Christians. In April 2020, six months before the Supreme Court heard the New York case, a Kentucky judge in a U.S. district court, granted the request of a Louisville church, On Fire Christian Center, against a prohibition issued by the mayor against public gatherings. The judge began with lengthy reflections on the Pilgrims, whom he described as "heirs to a long line of persecuted Christians, including some punished with prison or worse for the crime of celebrating Easter." "The Pilgrims understood at least this much," he concluded: "No place, not even the unknown, is worse than any place whose state forbids the exercise of your sincerely held religious beliefs."[3] I would highly recommend Charles McCrary's recent book, *Sincerely Held*, for new insights into how this final phrase shapes both cultural and legal conceptions of religion in the United States.[4]

Several months later, in July 2020, the Supreme Court very narrowly decided a Nevada case in the opposite direction, in favor of the state. In *Calvary Chapel Dayton Valley v. Steve Sisolak, Governor of Nevada,* Justice Kagan's majority opinion found that the governor had compelling reasons in a public health emergency to issue strict guidelines regulating public gatherings; and that the guidelines he had imposed were clear and consistent with the law. But it was the dissenting opinions by Justices Alito and Gorsuch that reverberated across conservative circles. Gorsuch wrote, evocatively: "There is no world in which the Constitution permits Nevada to favor Caesar's Palace over Calvary Chapel." The name "Caesar's Palace" allowed Gorsuch to rhetorically identify the state not only with the gambling industry but also with the villain of the Christian New Testament, the Roman emperor Caesar.[5]

Writing in *Newsweek,* Jeremy Dys of the conservative First Liberty Institute quoted Gorsuch and then moved into a familiar story of early Christians fleeing persecution by hiding in the catacombs. No government, Dys concluded, could thwart equally freedom-loving Americans: "If it takes converting casinos, laundromats, beaches, and

abortion clinics into the 21st-century version of the catacombs in order for Americans to meet and exercise their faith," he wrote, "religious liberty will find a way to survive the authoritarian dictates of elected officials treating the faithful like second-class citizens."[6] (It is worth noting here that, according to biblical scholar Candida Moss, the familiar stories of early Christian persecution and martyrdom, including their supposed withdrawal into the catacombs, were vastly exaggerated to suit the polemical purposes of later Christians. They serve the same purpose still.[7])

Chief Justice John Roberts voted in the Nevada case with the more liberal justices who favored the government's right to set strict public health guidelines. But the balance of power changed with Amy Coney Barrett, leading to the ruling against New York State in November 2020 and a similar decision in February 2021 against California, in the case *South Bay United Pentecostal Church v. Newsom*. A recent study indicates that the Roberts Court has increasingly sided with religious organizations—deciding 80% of cases in their favor, in contrast to an average of 50% of relevant cases since 1953. Just as telling, religious freedom cases in the twenty-first century are overwhelmingly filed by Catholics and/or evangelical Protestants, a clear change from twentieth-century cases that mostly involved religious minorities.[8]

It is important to note that religious groups in the United States held a wide variety of positions on the issue of church closures. In the California case, for example, fourteen religious and nonprofit organizations including the National Council of Churches and the Central Conference of American Rabbis filed a joint *amicus curiae* brief arguing *against* the protesting churches and in favor of the state's pandemic restrictions. "The right to free exercise was not viewed during the Founding Era as overriding laws meant to ensure public safety," they wrote.[9]

The Supreme Court in its majority opinion thought otherwise. According to Northwestern University law professor Andrew Koppelman, this set of cases has intensified the court's rightward shift by creating a "most-favored-nation" principle that provides religious groups with outsized privileges. If any group at all is exempted from otherwise applicable rules, the court now holds, then the same exemption must automatically be granted to anyone who claims it on religious grounds.[10] In this way, the issue of pandemic closures has furthered a shift in religious freedom jurisprudence that increasingly elevates conservative versions of this freedom OVER other constitutional claims.

I found in my book *Religious Freedom* that white Christians in the early twentieth century often weaponized this freedom in public disputes, long before the Supreme Court regularly heard religious freedom cases. In some ways that weaponization became more difficult in the later twentieth century, when, however unevenly, the Court adopted a civil liberties model that prioritized the rights of individuals and minority groups. The current court has

chosen, instead, an aggressive and majoritarian model of religious freedom that prioritizes conservative Christian groups, more than individuals, placing faulty historical narratives about the Pilgrims' quest for religious liberty and about the persecution of early Christians at the heart of American identity. With this court, the white Christian nationalist weaponization of religious freedom has in fact reached a new stage.

---

[1] John Yoo, "Supreme Court Rejection of Cuomo's COVID restrictions on worship upholds religious liberty," November 27, 2020, FoxNews.com. The case is *Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn v. Cuomo*, 592 U.S. __ (2020).

[2] Abram Van Engen, *City on a Hill: A History of American Exceptionalism* (Yale University Press, 2020).

[3] *Fire Christian Center Inc v. Fischer*, 2020 WL 1820249 (W.D. Ky. 4/11/20), https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/kentucky/kywdce/3:2020cv00264/116558/6.

[4] Charles McCrary, *Sincerely Held: American Secularism and Its Believers*, Class 200: New Studies in Religion (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2022), https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/S/bo135951072.html.

[5] Dissenting opinions from Alito and Gorsuch, 591 U.S., Calvary Chapel Dayton Valley v. Steve Sisolak, Governor of Nevada, et.al., July 24, 2020. Alito made similar comments in a hard-hitting speech to the Federalist Society that fall. Cited in Evan Gerstmann, "Are Pandemic Restrictions Endangering Religious Freedom?" *Forbes*, November 18, 2020, https://www.forbes.com/sites/evangerstmann/2020/11/18/are-pandemic-restrictions-endangering-religious-freedom/?sh=16824e7747ea.

[6] Jeremy Dys, "Religious Liberty will Prevail over the Pandemic," *Newsweek*, August 12, 2020.

[7] Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians invented a Story of Martyrdom* (New York, HarperOne, 2013).

[8] The study was authored by political scientist Lee Epstein and law professor Eric Posner; cited in Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux, "The Supreme Court's Right Turn Goes Way Beyond Guns and Abortion," *FiveThirtyEight* (January 13, 2022), https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-supreme-courts-right-turn-goes-way-beyond-guns-and-abortion/.

[9] "Motion by Religious and Civil-Rights Organizations, with Attached *Amicus Curiae* Brief in Support of

Respondents and in Opposition to Emergency Application for Writ of Injunction," filed January 2021, *South Bay United Pentecostal Church v. Newsom*, https://www.supremecourt.gov/DocketPDF/20/20A136/167353/20210127092945586_AU%20et%20al%20amicus%20motion%20with%20brief%20--%20S%20Bay%20v%20Newsom%20--%20final%20PDFA.pdf.

[10] Andrew Koppelman, "How religious liberty was distorted in the age of COVID-19," *The Hill*, November 21, 2021, https://thehill.com/opinion/judiciary/582478-how-religious-liberty-was-distorted-in-the-age-of-covid-19/, Despite Koppelman's fears early in 2021, the court has NOT so far found that the state must grant religious exemptions to vaccine mandates—perhaps because these claimants are supported by very few churches or other religious organizations—and the courts have categorized their motivations, for the most part, as more political than religious.

Susan Ridgely
University of Wisconsin-Madison

How do we understand conservative calls for religious freedom in response to vaccine mandates and other pandemic politics, even among conservatives who seem to be non-religious at best? My decades of ethnographic research analyzing how users of Focus on the Family materials engaged with that organization's multimedia empire help to make sense of these claims.[1] During my active research, which concluded in 2013, no Focus user mentioned the First Amendment directly. Instead, they discussed governmental overreach, particularly in the schools and at home. They learned this concept as part of Focus's teachings about of Reconstructionist Christianity, which seeks to bring all areas of American life under God's law, from the home to the school, to the workplace, and the government.[2]

As early as his bestselling book *Dare to Discipline*, published in 1971, James Dobson, Focus's founder, taught that the ever-growing federal government was largely responsible for destroying the church and the patriarchal nuclear family through supporting gender equity and non-discrimination policies that encouraged women to challenge their homemaker role.[3] He and his organization continued to nuance this stance, in conjunction with the wider conservative political sphere, even after he departed Focus in 2009, for his new venture Family Talk. Over these 40 years Focus developed a closed-media network through direct mail and AM radio to teach its religio-political vision of Christianity, and by extension America, with little interference from journalists, left-leaning politicians, and others. This vision of Christianity was built on "right relationships," or roles, rather than right action: True Christian women, for example, are not those who know and live by scripture, they are homemakers who submitted to their husbands. In so doing they fit correctly into God's role for them, according to Focus, based on the Trinity—God equaled the Father, the wife like Jesus submitted and sacrificed, and the children fulfilled the role of the Holy Spirit—as the product of the union of the the two. This triune model, Focus taught, defined roles in all sanctified spheres of life.

Dobson was never simply the folksy, conservative Dear Abby that America long believed him to be. Teaching Americans their godly roles is in itself political. He always used his platform as a supporter of American families to shape Americans' view of national politics. Moreover, almost since its founding in 1977, Focus had ties to the Republican Party. In 1981 Dobson announced Focus's connection to the Reagan administration by having Susan Baker, the wife of then–White House Chief of Staff James Baker, on its board of directors. Simultaneously, Dobson founded the Family Research Council, to act as its political voice.[4] Although Dobson left no direct evidence of coordination with politicians, statements from Focus and those from the Republican National Committee became mutually reinforcing. The connections were often made explicit in Focus's *Citizen Magazine*. *Citizen* debuted in 1987 to keep "friends informed about political developments threatening the home."[5] Here Focus would plainly state the threat America faced because of contemporary policies supporting gender equality, LGBTQ rights, and immigration reform which usurped power from the churches and the family. As Focus explained it: "Governors and magistrates hold their power purely as delegates and representatives of the King of all kings. They are appointed and armed with the sword in order that they might 1) punish evil and 2) condone good." These two roles are the governments only roles. While *Citizen* regularly critiqued the government by assessing proposed legislation and police actions in these terms to its audience, the mainstream press viewed focus as "largely non-political" and Dobson as beloved for his AM radio broadcasts with its "timeless" advice to American mothers.

The political, however, wasn't relegated to *Citizen,* as Dobson regularly preempted scheduled broadcasts saying, "Occasionally issues come to our attention that affect the quality of life in the society. . . . [W]hen issues such as pornography, abortion, child abuse, the funding of anti-family organizations by the government, … and other social concerns cry out for Christian comment, we will express our views and opinions."[6] Through breaking news broadcasts, inserts in the monthly newsletter and the like, Focus was moving its readers away from the nightly news years before the mainstream noticed. In 1990 Citizen made readers aware of the "The Sinking Credibility of the Press," which they argued, all too often "advocat[ed] homosexuality and promiscuity" and never represented Focus's position as "one supported by mainstream values."[7] The nightly news, they argued, too often maligned Christian values and the Truth, capital "T," in favor presenting a diversity of viewpoints and personalities. This diversity, they taught by implication, went against the singular truth of God, which was by default patriarchal, ableist, heterosexual, and white.

At its peak, through the broadcasts (on over 4,000 radio stations), a monthly newsletter and magazine (sent to over 250 million families), and a popular publishing house, Focus began building more than just a parenting empire, it was creating a closed-media network with magazines, like *Citizen*, agencies, like Family Research Council, and crosspollinating relationships, such as those with the Christian Broadcasting Network and Fox news. Each outlet presented their messages in mutually reinforcing ways giving listeners the impression that they were getting many different perspectives all reaching the same conclusion. This

conclusion was presented as the timeless, commonsense, conclusion amidst all disagreements of the day.

To perpetuate this interpretation Dobson knit together his work on religious radio with appearances on conservative secular networks such as Fox News. In so doing, he sanctified these secular resources. While Focus described this orientation as biblical, conservative news outlets and politicians often presented similar assessments under the banner of "real American values," "tradition," or "commonsense," as they amplified, normalized, and sacralized their developing positions on current cultural trends. How did politicians learn this worldview? If not from Fox News's secular version, then often from the Drollingers, former Focus employees, who began Capitol Ministries in 1996. They taught politicians their Christian worldview in Wednesday Bible Studies on Capitol Hill, a venture that continues today.[8] The recent May 2, 2022, Capitol Ministries Bible Study, "God's Institutions and their Roles on Earth" for example, asserted that the State's role is to moralize—to praise and punish. The handout provided a cheat sheet for knowing if the state had overreached and was in wrong relationship with God: "*State eclipsing marriage: redefinition of marriage/State eclipsing family: nanny state/ State eclipsing commerce: socialism/ State eclipsing church: theocracy.*"[9] Here again, these politicians are being taught that the central question about policy is "does it fulfill its Godly-design role?" If so, the policy is just, and should be defended. If not, the policy should be challenged as it will bring God's wrath.

This "if/then" logic skillfully precludes asking a whole host of ethical questions about context and consequences. There is no room here to ask who is hurt by the law or ruling? Who is helped? What unexpected effects might there be? Instead, each issue or action is isolated and engaged with separately asking, "Is it commensurate with upholding its divine role in its particular sphere?" This logic stands on the shoulders of a white Protestant theological understanding in which the individual's relationship with God alone is what matters for salvation.

With this network and message established, alternative news outlets, fake news bots, etc. can now use this template, and the system of news flows that sustain it, to help ensure that they appeal to viewers by articulating stories that affirm the triune stamp, as they shift and extend the message to incorporate new political desires. In this framework the political and the religious have become indistinguishable, as the religious is often erased to attract more viewers, much like when the Christian children's video series Veggie Tales appeared on NBC without the Bible verses, but maintaining their quasi-Christian messages.

Today, conservative organizations use this network to explicitly educate their listeners on what they insist is the country's right relationship to the First Amendment. This education is essential, so their listeners will convince themselves and their friends of the rightness of allowing Coach Kennedy to pray on the fifty-yard line, business owners to discriminate, or parents to thwart vaccine mandates. In Family Talk podcasts, Dobson teaches that freedom of religion is an "inalienable right," a right given by God therefore foundational to God's blueprint. While last year, Jim Daly, the current president of Focus, co-wrote an op-ed in the WSJ in which he claimed, "The American experiment was founded on, and has always thrived on, the freedom of religious believers to speak, teach, preach, practice, serve and work in peace—not only in private, but in the public square."[10] Dobson and Daly's statement reinforce their understanding that the First Amendment rightly understood protects the relationship between God and the believer from the government, not that of secular people to the public square, nor that of many Americans whose religious practices seem to push the government to act in the realms for they believe it is not designed, such as healthcare. In this framework, government mandates for vaccines or masks is not about stopping a pandemic, it is an effort to undermine the caregiving role of the church, family, and community. Here, healthcare, like education, rightly happens in the local, private realm. When put plainly, this messaging might seem extreme. When wrapped into blogs and memes about vaccinee mandates as governmental conspiracies, however many Americans now nod in agreement after decades of being told that the government, when it reaches into healthcare, is acting against the best interest of its citizens, and is a threat to the country's salvation.

---

[1] See, Susan B. Ridgely, *Practicing what the Doctor Preached: At Home with Focus on the Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[2] For more on Christian Reconstructionism, see Julie J. Ingersoll, *Building God's Kingdom: Inside the World of Christian Reconstructionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[3] James C. Dobson, *Dare to Discipline* (Wheaton: IL: Tyndale House, 1970.

[4] Linda Kintz, *Between Jesus and the Market* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 113. Within these political organizations, Dobson met Pat Robertson, Ralph Reed, Phyllis Schlaffly, Bill Bright, and other leading conservatives. The list of guests on Focus on the Family Broadcasts made these connections overt, while the similarities between Dobson and the other members may signal efforts to present America with a more coherent conservative Christian message. For more, see Edward Ericson Jr., "Behind Closed Doors at the CNP," *Church and State* 49 no. 6 (June 1996) and http://www.seekgod.ca/cnp.d.htm for biographies of all CNP members.

[5] "Resources for the Home: The Citizen Magazine," *Focus on the Family Magazine*, January 1987, 4.

[6] "Coming Broadcasts," *Focus on the Family with James Dobson*, November 1983, 14.

[7] Rolf Zettersten, "The Sinking Credibility of the Press," *Focus on the Family with James Dobson*, January 1990, 23.

[8] For Capitol Ministries Mission, Board of Directors and more see: https://capmin.org.

[9] Ralph Drollinger, "God's Institutions and their Role on Earth" https://capmin.org/gods-institutions-and-their-roles-on-earth/

[10] Salvatore J. Cordileone and Jim Daly, "Social Media's Threat to Religious Freedom: A Theologian's Talk on the Christian view of Sex was deemed a "Content Violation" *The Wall Street Journal* August 12, 2021: https://www.wsj.com/articles/social-media-religious-freedom-youtube-first-amendment-section-230-carl-trueman-sacramento-gospel-conference-11628802706.

Matthew Avery Sutton
Washington State University

I want to begin by thanking Philip Goff, Joseph Tucker Edmonds, Lauren Schmidt, and all the staff at IUPUI and Religion and American Culture. Once again this has been a wonderful conference. Today I plan to make three points—one theological, one legal, and one historical—regarding white American Christians' sense that they are losing their religious freedom.

Theological:

First, to understand why Christians—in this section of my talk specifically evangelical Christians—believe that their freedoms are under attack we must take seriously the apocalyptic nature of evangelicalism. I believed that apocalypticism mattered more than historians and religious studies scholars believed when I published *American Apocalypse* in 2014, and I believe it now more than ever.[1]

Evangelicals make up about one quarter of the U.S. population and the majority of evangelicals believe that we are living in the end times. A 2010 Pew poll revealed that 58% of white evangelicals believe that Jesus is "definitely" or "probably" going to return by 2050. According to the 2014 *Bible in American Life* report, of the 50% of all Americans who had read the Bible at all in the previous year, over one-third claimed that they did so "to learn about the future."[2]

Over the last 150 years evangelicals articulated a series of signs that indicate to them when the world would be on the verge of the Antichrist taking power and Jesus's subsequent return. One sign is the eradication of true Christianity by the foot soldiers of the Antichrist. In order for the devil's minions to succeed, they will have to take away true Christians' "religious freedom," their religious liberty.

Now I know many of you in here know as well as I do that your average church going evangelical does not know their premillennialism from their post-millennialism or the pre-tribulation rapture for the post-tribulation rapture. That doesn't matter. They have been primed to interpret everything happening around them as part of the fulfillment of prophecy, as part of a huge end-times apocalyptic conspiracy. Apocalypticism is now built into evangelical DNA. They have heard for generations that the state is (or will be) the enemy and that in the end times the world's governments will attack their religious freedoms, and so that is how they are reading current events. These Christians have been claiming in sermons, on social media, and during protests that malicious forces stole the 2020 election, conspired to quash Christian liberties, and in the name of COVID clamped down on their freedom to worship and spread the Christian gospel. For them the signs of coming Antichrist are appearing.

Furthermore, there is a particularly American strain to this kind of thinking. Most evangelicals believe that the United States is not described in the Bible's end times history. The believe the United States might cede its independence and align with the Antichrist, and like most of the rest of the world, persecute the remnant of true Christians.

Or the United States might be one of the few faithful nations, an end-times redoubt where true Christianity is practiced, the gospel is preached, and the power of the Antichrist is constantly challenged and subverted until the second coming of Christ. Evangelicals hope the United States will be the latter but fear that unless they act and act decisively, it could be the former. And so they act. In this way they merge Christian apocalyptic theology with American nationalism, remaking evangelicalism as a Christian nationalist movement.

Legal:

Second, to understand why white Christians believe that their freedoms are under attack we must understand their view of the law over the last half century. Whether or not you all agree with me that apocalyptic theology helps us make sense of why so many white Christians think of themselves as a besieged minority, I hope and trust you all agree that they do think of themselves as a besieged minority. A turning point came during the debate over race and schools.

As I am sure you all know, in 1970 the Internal Revenue Service revoked the tax-exempt status of private schools that practiced racial discrimination, including Bob Jones University (BJU). The university fought the IRS in a series of court battles for over a decade. The BJU suit eventually made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court. That the federal government, through its tax policies, could indirectly affect policy in private, Christian schools troubled many white Christians. And for many, this battle was about much more than race. I first realized this when I was putting together documents for a little reader I published in 2012, *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right: A Brief History with Documents*.[3]

In searching for documents, I stumbled upon an amicus curiae brief submitted by the National Association of Evangelicals (the largest evangelical lobbying organization in the country) in 1981 on behalf of Bob Jones. NAE attorneys argued that "The ominous threat to religious freedom posed by the decision of the court below compels us to submit this brief." They noted that Bob Jones University "follows a policy with respect to interracial dating and marriage based not on personal bias or prejudice, but sincere religious belief." The NAE then noted that as an

organization it disagreed with the university's reading of scripture on race. For the NAE, race was not the real issue at stake—religious freedom was. (Or was it???)

Most evangelical leaders disagreed with Jones on the school's policies and the theology behind them. What drove the NAE to get involved was leaders' fear that the Bob Jones decision was just the beginning of a series of cases against Christian institutions that would extend far beyond race. "We are also deeply disturbed," the NAE attorneys wrote, that "what the Government might view as a violation of the public policy against sex discrimination, evangelicals would consider faithful adherence to Scriptural teaching with respect to the proper roles of women within the church." In other words, white Christians such as those at the NAE expected the courts not just to focus on race but also on gender, and, although they did not say so here, we can add to their list of fears, issues of sexuality.

White Christians correctly understood that a conflict was brewing between their readings of the Bible—patriarchal, sexist, racist, homophobic—and the direction the courts were taking. And they were right. The Bob Jones case was (hopefully) just the beginning of the government prioritizing the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment over the free exercise clause of the First Amendment. But we shall see.

We also know that white Christians did not give up after losing the Bob Jones case. Instead, they invested millions of dollars into creating advocacy law firms to fight the courts every step of the way, the fruit of which we are seeing today. White Christians lost their right to discriminate on the basis of race, but they are still clutching to their ability to discriminate on the bases of gender and sexuality.

History:

Finally, to understand why white Christians believe that their freedoms are under attack we must be honest about American history. This will be my shortest, and perhaps most controversial, point. When white Christians say that the disestablishment clause was intended to keep government out of religion and not religion out of government, they are right. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the first half of the twentieth, politicians, courts, and much of the most influential media participated in and routinely reenforced an unofficial white protestant religious establishment. David Sehat makes this clear in his excellent 2011 book *The Myth of American Religious Freedom*, and I am making this argument in the history of American Christianity from Columbus to the insurrection that I am currently writing.[4]

I wish Jefferson's "high wall of separation" phrase was in the Constitution, but it is not. His language to the Danbury Baptists reflected how he hoped the First Amendment would be read and understood, but, as we know, Jefferson was not typical. He was not representative. Of course, today we do read into the First Amendment Jefferson's "high wall of separation" line. The courts have insisted on this since the 1940s (through the Everson and McCollum cases).[5] And I am glad they have. But those white Christians who long for the days when the courts privileged white protestants are on solid historical ground. The courts used to do exactly what they want to see today, and the Constitution as understood by the pre-World War II courts allowed it. As we work to defend church-state separation and the rights of religious minorities against the white Christian majority, we need to understand that for much of its history this government prioritized the religious liberties of the white protestant majority over everyone else. Religious freedom was freedom for them, not for the rest of us. This is a nation that did not really allow for religious freedom for non-white, non-protestant folks until very recently.

In sum, to understand white Christian claims that their religious freedom is under assault, we need to understand that first, they are correct in their understanding of U.S. history—in the past they did have privileges that have slowly eroded including the right to discriminate on the basis of race, gender, and sexual orientation. Second, that they have lost some of these privileges feeds into their apocalyptic expectations about the end times as well as their Christian nationalist ideology. Third, rather than remain passive as the world changes around them, they have moved ever deeper into partisan politics and enlisted an army of attorneys to fight on their behalf. And they may be winning. The Trump Court may well be for them the salvation they have been praying for over the last few decades and it may well be for the rest of us the hell we thought we had moved beyond.

[1] Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

[2] Pew Research Center, "Religious Landscape Study," https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/; Pew Research Center, "Jesus Christ's Return to Earth," https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2010/07/14/jesus-christs-return-to-earth/.

[3] Matthew Avery Sutton, *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012).

[4] David Sehat, *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[5] Steven K. Green, *The Third Disestablishment: Church, State, and American Culture, 1940-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Graduate Research Presentations

At this year's Biennial Conference, we invited advanced graduate students to present on their research at the opening night dessert reception. Sponsored by the Center's journal, *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, 11 graduate students were selected to provide 3-4 minute mini-presentations describing their project and the import and impact of their work on American religion.

Loveleen Brar
University of Michigan

Since the 1980s, Punjabi Sikhs have been slowly carving out their niche within the trucking industry. Of the more than 500,000 Punjabi Sikhs in the U.S., upwards of 150,000 are thought to be involved in trucking, with the majority working as drivers, but an increasing number working in services catering directly to Punjabi truck drivers. The most interesting of which to me are the Punjabi owned truck stops that have popped up all across the U.S., that feature not only gas pumps and a place to park overnight, but oftentimes a Punjabi restaurant and a makeshift Sikh temple. My dissertation then looks closely at these truck stops as sites that foster community and belonging for the Punjabi Sikh diaspora. My dissertation asks two questions: What social worlds are created and recreated in the diaspora? And more specifically, in what ways does the truck stop become a site for diasporic culture, care, faith, and survival?

Using ethnographic methods, I argue that the network of Punjabi Sikhs in the trucking industry create a routed community, connected by the Punjabi truck stops. While community is generally thought of as something relatively permanent and *rooted*, life as a long-haul trucker keeps you from home for the majority of the month. This community becomes routed in the sense that it's not located in a singular location, but rather fostered at various truck stops along the major interstates, where a driver's route might take him several times a month. It is during these infrequent but routine stops that a community is formed over time.

There are three aspects of these stops that facilitate a sense of community. One, these stops are owned by and frequented by a largely Punjabi population. This is especially important to consider during a post 9-11 moment, where Punjabi Sikhs are still met with xenophobic and Islamophobic hostility on the road, often because of their turbans and uncut beards. These stops offer a space of safety and comfortability for otherwise vulnerable drivers. Second, These stops offer a Punjabi restaurant, often serving Punjabi comfort food, which not only facilitates feelings of diasporic return and can feed drivers' nostalgia for the homeland, but can also provide a space of conviviality, where Punjabi drivers can eat, drink, converse, and be together. Third, many of these stops have built makeshift temples and spaces to pray, often turning trailers and old fireworks stands into one room temples. Truck stop owners describe building these small temples to accommodate the increasing number of Sikh drivers, with one truck stop owner commenting, "you shouldn't have to lose your faith when you're working hard." In this way, the drivers are not only part of a routed community, but become part of a mobile congregation as well.

While there is a substantial amount of work written about ethnic and immigrant congregations and the religious institutions they have built for and by themselves, I believe my dissertation will extend this conversation by focusing specifically on the everyday experiences of working class diasporas, whose lives are often predominated by the work they do. Because truck drivers are required to be mobile for the majority of the month, they have to be inventive in how they feed their cultural nostalgia and their faith on the road. These truck stops then offer a place of cultural and spiritual rootedness in an otherwise transient and oftentimes precarious working day.

Isaiah Ellis
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

At the 1929 ceremonial opening of the Tamiami Trail, the first paved road connecting Florida's Atlantic and Gulf Coast by crossing the Everglades, a Seminole man named Assumhachee shook the hand of Miami mayor E.G. Sewell, in a photo op captured by a resident of Estero, a nearby town founded by a utopian religious group called the Koreshan Unity. Sewell was marketing a drained and cultivated Everglades region as a future haven for white farmers and tourists. Estero's residents enthusiastically supported the paving-over of the Edenic landscape that had brought them south from Chicago in the first place. Assumhachee, who led the team that broke the path for the Tamiami Trail, had made possible—and very visibly so—a project predicated on a narrative of his own disappearance. How did this cast of characters contend with the road's role in their futures?

Infrastructure has had a way of smoothing over the political, racial, and metaphysical contradictions in the American project since at least the early-twentieth century, fomenting cultural narratives of the common good predicated on the troubled meanings of "modernity," "civilization," and—as I contend in my research—"religion."

The Tamiami Trail and its ecological, economic, and religious environs offer one particularly textured case study for making sense of how such diverse actors and diverging projects coalesced around the idea and reality of modernized roads. It formed part of the "good roads movements" that took the southern United States by storm at the turn of the century and laid the groundwork for the nation's modern highway system. Self-styled southern good roads "apostles" produced polemics, sermons, parables, and other "gospel" texts advocating improved roads. They anchored their projects in Protestant theologies of missionization, redemption, and "civilization" that invigorated Jim Crow economic relations and underpinned practices of transforming land for infrastructure development, which were both structurally racist and settler-colonial.

In these contexts, state and economic entities not usually considered meaningful agents of cultural production played prominent roles in crafting connections between infrastructural, moral, and religious improvement—connections whose deep impacts and contradictions require our attention. Understanding southern good roads projects and advocacy has thus required reading the mundane against its grain. Engineering reports, land surveys, drainage plans, geological bulletins, and other apparently boring artifacts of governance articulate and unfurl the cultural logics of infrastructure, and the territorial logics of American religion. In my work, I call this admixture "the southern gospel of good roads."

The archives of American infrastructure, and the traces and absences they produce as conditions of the afterlives of enslavement and the ongoing conditions of settler-colonization in the South, extend and reframe the study of religion in American culture in three ways. First, they afford a critical examination of the infrastructural imaginaries that have guided scholars' interpretations of religion around sites such as the Erie Canal, western railroads, the Atlantic telegraph, and more.[1] Second, they lend new sites to our consideration of "frontier" territoriality outside of the American West, and at a finer grain than the global horizons of Protestant missionary ambition. And finally, they reveal new ways that Jim Crow religious and racial politics have shaped other American contexts as they benefitted mutually from the rhetorical and material rubrics of racial capitalism.

---

[1] Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); David Walker, *Railroading Religion: Mormons, Tourists, and the Corporate Spirit of the West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Jenna Supp-Montgomerie, *When the Medium Was the Mission: The Atlantic Telegraph and the Religious Origins of Network Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2021).

Daniel Joslyn
New York University

If, in 1976, you flipped through any edition of *Playgirl* magazine, next to ads for "instant erection cream" and "battery-powered vibrators," you would find a bombastic advertisement for an "entire book," a "sexual best-seller" dedicated to "the art of prolonged lovemaking," the "tantric" practice of "Karezza," which would teach you the secret of "reaching the summit of sexual joy … for as long as you desire." Just a few years later, in 1981, the Senate Committee on Family Oversight and Planning introduced to the record a pamphlet attacking Planned Parenthood, which located birth-control activist Margaret Sanger's practice of "karezza" as center to her plot to replace the "family unit as the foundational unit for society" with the "self-centered sexual gratification of the individual."

In this potpourri of misogynistic half-truths and orientalist hyperboles, we can glimpse the vague outlines of the real story of a widely popular set of sexual practices that spanned the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the anarchist, socialist and feminist movements and that was instrumental in bringing birth control and homosexuality into the American mainstream. To the myriad advocates of these sexual formations, spiritual elevation, sexual and political radicalism, and white racial regeneration were inherently intertwined. Through the act of caressing one another naked without orgasming, Karezza-practitioners would build up their magnetic "vital forces," learn the "self-control" necessary for the coming socialist utopia, elevate the role of white women in society, and bring forth a race of superior children, born with the female virtues of cooperation and love. These children, in turn, would "rule the nations with a rod of iron" breaking "in pieces the institutions that stand in the path of true motherhood," women's equality and true socialism.

In 1848, the communitarian socialist John Humphrey Noyes combined racist phrenological theories, Swedenborgian spiritualist visions and utopian socialist ideas about the reorganization of gender roles in his introduction of the practice of "Male Continence" to the Oneida Commune. As a means of moving up a spiritual hierarchy, Oneidans were to have sex in which men transmuted their urge to ejaculate into magnetic, spiritual powers. Using this practice, carefully chosen superior people would produce spiritually superior children, in the nation's first eugenics experiment.

In the 1870s and 80s, this practice would travel from Noyes's pamphlets into the heart of the "individualist anarchist" and free love movements. Against the "penis trust" of rapidly consolidating industrial capitalism and men's systemic domination over women, they proffered Dianism, a version of "Male Continence" in which both men and women withheld ejaculation. In 1896, the practice morphed again, as the Dianist physician Alice Bunker

Stockham coined the term "Karezza" in a sex-manual sold hundreds of thousands of copies, was translated into six languages and helped to define "New Women" and "New Thought" sexuality. In the early 1900s, Karezza would be taken up by some of the most influential anglophone feminist and socialist thinkers, including Havelock Ellis, Margaret Sanger and Edward Carpenter. Through the writings of the queer anarchist J. William Lloyd it would make way to the heart of Greenwich Village Bohemia. From there, Karezza travelled to inter-war Germany in the teachings of Mazdaznanism, a new religious movement that found hundreds of thousands of adherents both in bourgeoning socialist and fascist movements. Later, in the 1950s, Karezza would travel back to the United States through such New Age writers as Alan Watts, who wrote leftist politics out of the story, reinventing Karezza as a long-lost "oriental" sexual practice, which would become popular as "tantric sex."

In all, the story of Karezza is a story of the sexual politics of "new age" religion and of the religio-racial politics of sexual liberation. It is a story that takes seriously the unjust and intertwined domination of money and masculinity, and at the same time it is a story of the limits and failures of the white left in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Amanda J.G. Napior
Boston University

"There's something motherfuckin' transfor*ma*tional about prison…It's a place of transformation, if you use it that way." These were the words of motivational speaker Taj Jenkins,[1] in the chapel at BCHC, the Berkshire County House of Correction, a medium security men's prison in Massachusetts.[2]

Taj's talk was about overcoming struggle through a transformation of challenge and the self. His exemplars of personal change are an ex-drug dealer-turned millionaire-chef and Oprah-guest and a Navy SEAL whose YouTube videos have titles like "How to Make Yourself Immune to Pain." Taj will say: "You are 100% accountable for everything that happens in your life."

Taj's talk marshals another worthy hero: Malcom X. In fact, that the young Muslim leader gained literacy *while* incarcerated occasions Taj's claim that prisons are transformative. However, by framing reading as an individual attainment, Taj divorces it from the political and religious purposes of Malcolm X. The transformation Taj speaks of may not be as subversive as the kinds of change for which the young Black Muslim leader would become an assassinated state enemy for advocating.

My dissertation documents how "personal transformation" is narrated, embodied, and deployed behind bars—with particular attention to rehabilitation programming, religious services, and parole hearings. An array of programs at BCHC encourage incarcerated men to embrace the possibility of redemptive personal change, often through the idiom of "spirituality." I broadly contend that the people who have volunteered, worked, and lived in the American prison have helped create what many people in the United States, today, may simply think of as "spirituality."

This project is partly historical. Metaphysical religious movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are among the ancestors of much Spiritual But Not Religious contemporary programming.[3] Twelve-step groups, heir to early recovery movements, are one example. Modern postural yoga—and the Theosophical forces that helped popularize it, another. New Thought's emphasis on mind and positive thinking is omnipresent.

The late nineteenth century is also what most criminologists consider the dawn of Corrections—or contemporary criminal-legal systems. This period saw the proliferation of parole boards and rise of indeterminate sentencing—seen as ways to motivate the transformable prisoner but keep intractable ones locked away for good. Such distinctions were and continue to be coded along intersections of race, class, gender, religion, and sexuality. Metaphysical religious actors shaped those practices, too.

Now, personal transformation is not exclusively a project of Corrections professionals, but something incarcerated men at BCHC are concerned with also—whether through working the steps, in practicing meditation, or in casting spells for an upcoming court date. Yet many men are also critical of this focus and, relatedly, worried about performing poorly at parole—or maybe too well. One man, Brian Tremblay, said to me, "What do I say to these people?...Some people have the gift of gab, and they'll just say, 'Oh, this guy's bullshitting us!'"

My project shows how programs and services at BCHC mutually reinforce one another, spiritualizing and naturalizing the state's prerogative to incarcerate. Taj's workshop is but one example of how investments in personal change can place the onus for social change on individual incarcerated people, letting the rest of us all off the hook from seriously challenging the systems that have disenfranchised them.

To students of religion, American culture, and the prison, my interest in personal transformation is hardly controversial. Yet its place in Corrections deserves careful attention. I contend that faith in the possibility of personal transformation harmonizes with Romantic yearnings in American culture, supporting the most startling of convictions: that the prison is the most exemplary place for personal change.

Thank you for your attention.

---

[1] All names are pseudonyms. Many but not all were chosen by my interlocutors.

[2] This ethnographic dissertation is grounded in relationships developed over the last decade and six and a half months of immersive fieldwork at BCHC, between September 2019 and March 2020. BCHC is a facility for "men," as biologically designated by the state. To the best of my knowledge, all my incarcerated interlocutors identified as male, during my fieldwork. For that reason, I refer to them corporately as men. However, trans women have previously been incarcerated at BCHC.

[3] Scholars have variously (and particularly) described these movements as "metaphysical" (Albanese 2008, Bender 2010), "liberal" (Schmidt 2005, Schmidt and Promey 2012), and "Africana esoteric" (Finley, Guillory and Page 2014). I use the term "metaphysical" here but will unpack the complexities of these terms and resulting word choices in my dissertation. (Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008; Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination*,

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010; Stephen Finley, Margarita Guillory, and Hugh Page Jr., eds., *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience: There Is a Mystery*, Leiden: BRILL, 2014; Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005; Leigh E. Schmidt and Sally M. Promey, eds., *American Religious Liberalism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

L. Nelson Leonard
University of Texas

Birth certificates, citizenship papers, passports: in the U.S., these are the documents that define our official identities, distinguishing 'citizen' from 'alien.'

For transnational adoptees (those who were born abroad and then brought to the United States), these documents also tell the story of how families are made. The (im)migration process erases these children's original histories, names, and ancestors. Rendered a neutral subject, they are then are assimilated into families and given new identities through adoption. At this point, these adoptees are officially recognized with fresh documentation that certifies household and territorial belonging.

Religion is often part of the complex dynamic that triangulates transnational adoptees, their original homeland, and their new host land (i.e., America). However, both popular culture and academic research centers the experiences of adoptive parents by giving attention to their reproductive motivations. Even as more recent approaches have evolved to include work on the social implications of transnational adoption, such discourses primarily interpret adoption as a humanitarian exchange between vulnerable women and more stable prospective parents. Analyses of historical and current processes that condition the possibility of transnational adoption neglect to consider the perspectives of adoptees themselves, leaving our knowledge about how transnational adoptees negotiate their new identities in American families, communities, and spaces incomplete.

I'm really drawn to this gap because transnational adoptees directly embody the collision of family-making, and nation-building. In my dissertation, I examine transnational adoption alongside the religious legacies that underwrite American culture. I argue that the policies, praxis, and discourses of citizenship in the U.S. belie a particularly Protestant imagination of "citizen" and "alien." I am interested in how (and why!) some formal designations of family belonging determine which 'aliens' can be absorbed into the nation, especially when other claims of kinship do not.

Departing from more parent-focused methods, I combine social history with ethnography to center transnational adoptees themselves. What I find is that adoptees share a diasporic identity rooted in a desire for new sodalities "based on shared memory bridges linking their lived space and their left-behind place (Johnson, 48)." Thus, adoptees are similar to other transnational diasporic subjects in that they have socially and psychologically potent bonds to a "homeland" of memory.

So even as transnational adoption emerges out of Protestant domesticity and nation-building, adoptees are reimagining their sense of belonging outside of a citizen/alien binary.

Bringing transnational adoption into our conversations about religion in America can help us think more expansively about topics like reproductive commodification and exploitation; family separation(s); human trafficking; migration and immigration; carceral systems; race and gender; diaspora; and really so much more.

My work opens that dialogue by (1) addressing contradictions, modes of resistance, struggles, and tensions that exist at the nexus of family and nation; and (2) offering a framework for articulating social expressions tied to the religious legacies of the United States.

Thank you, and I look forward to our discussion.

Alison Renna
Yale University

It is difficult to walk through a grocery store or to flip through a health magazine and not be confronted with the idea that microorganisms are living inside of your body, and that those microorganisms matter for your body's flourishing. Physicians have long known that microorganisms play a role in human digestion, but in the wake of a landmark 2004 study, microbiologists have begun to argue that microorganisms also influence cognitive processes we have long associated with human internal life—like the intensity of human fear and sadness, and expressions of autism, and the speed with which our minds age. Researchers have called microbiome-brain connection research a "paradigm shift in neuroscience" because it connects essential functions of human cognition to nonhuman microbial ecosystems, which themselves are linked to ever-changing ecosystems at many levels of scale, up to planetary microbial ecosystems (like, for example, the local one we have created together at this meeting). The intensity of a changed "paradigm" of human cognition inspired some scientists to articulate their work in philosophical, and even poetic, terms in scientific journals and in their public lives. As one prolific microbiome researcher, Emeran Mayer, said about his microbiome research in a recent documentary: "There's two ways of explaining it, as an engineer or as a spiritual person. And I think at the moment they're both equally valid." When we walk through the grocery store and advertisers promise us that we can manipulate our microbial systems by drinking kombucha, eating yogurt, purchasing probiotics, or even taking up spiritually coded practices like reiki and meditation, they draw us into this dramatic moment in biology.

My research is about the history of ideas that led to this moment in biology, philosophy, and health advertising. I argue that the spiritual promise of ecology we detect in microbiome-brain connection research is not new: systems theory, the theoretical basis of microbiome ecological science, has long provoked spiritual dreaming on the part of American scientists and philosophers.

My history begins with the birth of systems theory in the 1940s, when theorists began to argue with nearly metaphysically broad explanatory promise that phenomena as diverse as economics, psychiatry, sociology, computing, and the brain could be understood through the same structural theory: as sets of flows of information moving through interlocking networks and systems organized by feedback loops. Systems ecologists brought systems theory to biology by positing that all life might be understood as part of—a new word—"ecosystems," or nested global exchanges of matter and energy. In a turn that won't surprise readers of American metaphysical religion, the idea of global systems pairing the organization of the mind with the natural world inspired American systems ecologists and ecological philosophers to imagine that when thinking about ecological systems, science and spirituality had become interchangeable conceptual languages. By the 1960s, with the human ecology movement in full swing and hipster spirituality taking on a new life, ecological scientists and philosophers like Gregory Bateson and Stewart Brand—sometimes inspired by religious studies professors—hung around the Esalen Institute and William Irwin Thompson's Lindisfarne Association, arguing that systems ecology was inheriting the intellectual work of Zen Buddhism, of Alfred North Whitehead, and even our own Mircea Eliade, as a synthesis of science, philosophy, and spirituality.

My wager is that this history shows a moment where a field we understand as "scientific" and an intellectual tradition we understand as "philosophical" or "religious" formed one another's questions and shaped one another's priorities. This matters, because through the influence of philosophers like Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, and Jane Bennett, who build upon the thought of the systems theorists who were part of this moment, systems ecology and its spiritual shadows continue to shape the humanistic theories from which we draw to theorize scientific ideas like the microbial mind, like earth-wide ecosystems, like the complexities of intersubjectivity. This last point: one of our heaviest and oldest questions. Historians of American religion have not yet looked at the influence our material has had on one of the most significant scientific movements of the twentieth century. My project considers, in one way, how American religion is at the deepest guts of this story.

William Stell
Princeton University

Kenneth Gangel, an evangelical college professor, wrote his book *The Gospel and the Gay* in 1977, at the same time as Anita Bryant was leading her infamous antigay crusade in Miami. Gangel was sympathetic to Bryant's cause, but his crusade was of a different kind. His book did not take on gay teachers, did not give all that much space to the gay liberation movement. Instead, he focused his animus on Christian leaders, and particularly on a man named Ralph Blair, whom Gangel deemed "more dangerous to…the gay problem in Western culture today than the drag queens who march through the streets of San Francisco."[1]

Ralph Blair was a therapist in New York City, a former staff member for an evangelical college ministry (InterVarsity Christian Fellowship), and a former student at three Fundamentalist schools (Bob Jones University, Dallas Theological Seminary, and Westminster Theological Seminary). In 1976, Blair had founded an organization called Evangelicals Concerned, whose mission was to persuade evangelicals that homosexuality was morally neutral and that same-sex unions should be fully affirmed—provided they were monogamous and long-term. This small but nationwide organization, Evangelicals Concerned, was part of a group that Gangel derided as "the so-called 'gay evangelicals.'"[2]

Gangel was not alone. His book was one of eight books about homosexuality published by major evangelical presses in 1978—compared to four in 1977 and zero in 1976. Of those eight books, half seem uniquely agitated by these evangelical gay activists. Besides Ralph Blair, there was a lot of talk about Troy Perry, the Pentecostal pastor who founded the largely gay Metropolitan Community Churches. There was also a lot of talk about Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Mollenkott, two established evangelical writers who spearheaded a movement then called "biblical feminism" and who co-authored the 1978 book *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* These four—Blair, Perry, Scanzoni, and Mollenkott—collaborated on numerous fronts in the '70s and '80s as they worked to persuade evangelicals to affirm gay people.[3]

Though they were not a large group, these evangelical gay activists had an outsized impact. According to evangelical leaders like Gangel, these activists posed a genuine threat to evangelicalism's antigay stances. Moreover, in the late '70s, some journalists and scholars of religion agreed: from their vantage point, evangelical positions on homosexuality seemed to be up in the air.[4] But not for long—in part because voices like Blair's fueled a wave of antigay evangelical discourse that was bent on denying and distorting the substantial commonalities between people like Blair and people like Gangel.

My dissertation is a history of evangelical gay activism in the '70s and '80s, making interventions in the historiographies on evangelicalism, sexuality, and the Christian Right. To name one intervention that is relevant to each of these fields: scholars of all stripes have under-historicized evangelicals' antigay (and, related, antifeminist) stances, in part due to what I call hermeneutical determinism: predominantly attributing religious subjects' actions to the ways in which those subjects purport to read their scriptures. By attributing evangelicals' antigay stances to evangelicals' professed belief in biblical authority and professed hermeneutic of biblical literalism, scholars risk uncritically taking their subjects' discourse at face value, replicating their subjects' problematic assumptions about textual authority and perspicuity, confusing rhetorical strategies with underlying motives, and flattening histories of evangelicals' hermeneutical diversity. Against both scholarly and popular understandings, my research demonstrates that evangelical discourse on homosexuality in the '70s and '80s was contested, variable, and vulnerable.

---

[1] Kenneth Gangel, *The Gospel and the Gay* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1978), 105.

[2] Gangel, *The Gospel and the Gay*, 121 (see also pp. 42-43, 57-59, 92-93, 120-123, 145-152, 177).

[3] See e.g. Tim LaHaye, *The Unhappy Gays* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1978), 181-187; Richard Lovelace, *Homosexuality and the Church* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1978), 10-11, 49-52; Paul Morris, *Shadow of Sodom: Facing the Facts of Homosexuality* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1978), 7-10, 26-33, 71-80; Robert K. Johnston, *Evangelicals at an Impasse* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1979), 115-132.

[4] See Richard Quebedeaux, *The Worldly Evangelicals* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1978), 126-131; Erling Jorstad, "The Born Again Resurgence," *Religion in Life* 48, no. 2 (1979): 153-161.

Zara Surratt
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

In 1921, the German-born, first-generation immigrant Jesuit priest Eugene Buechel wrote a eulogy for the recently deceased Leah Rooks.

Rooks was a Sicangu Lakota student at St. Francis Mission Indian School, a Catholic Boarding School in South Dakota established near the end of the 19th century.

In the eulogy, Buechel emphasizes what he sees as a submissive piousness, remarking on how studious Rooks remains even as her body gives way to the decay of illness. His interpretation of her life and death justifies missionary activity as productive and desirable, portraying her death as a holy event.[1]

However, this eulogy suggests something else equally potent: it expresses his own assimilation as a productive U.S. citizen.

Buechel's work at St. Francis was part of Federal Indian Policy's assimilation agenda, which emphasized the destruction of Native American cultures and communities as a prelude to total socio-cultural absorption into the U.S. mainstream.[2]

At this time, Protestant influence attempted to block Catholics from participating in Federal Indian education. Anti-Catholic rhetoric suggested Catholics were not a part of the mainstream, unassimilated themselves and thus incapable of assimilating others.[3]

Buechel's eulogy argues otherwise, demonstrating what he perceived to be a remarkable case of successful assimilation, hinging upon Catholic instruction and guidance.

I argue that Catholic Indian boarding schools offered a unique vision of who could be American. Protestant framing of the Catholic 'other' led Catholic institutions such as the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions to lean into the residential school movement to demonstrate their place in American empire. Crucially, I argue that the story of St. Francis complicates theories of Americanization by establishing racial contact zones as foundational to its realization. Catholics lived Americanization through encounters with Native communities, especially Indigenous children.

I also argue that St. Francis staff and students found themselves in an extraordinarily unstable space of religio-cultural transformation. Survivors of Germany's *Kulturkampf* taught and learned English alongside Lakota youth who remembered the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee.[4] Viewing St. Francis as a microcosm that reflects a spectrum of accommodation and resistance to the demand to assimilate, I consider how Anglo-European and Indigenous religious subjects drew upon their own knowledge and practice to resist and reassert agency, when such assertions were possible.

Written material constitutes the bulk of my sources. I especially rely upon professional and personal sources from the BCIM, an archive dominated by but not limited to male religious authorship.[5] Rarer student authored sources include newspapers such as *The Indian Sentinel*, the official publication for the Society for the Preservation of the Faith Among Indian Children.[6]

My research expands upon the study of religion and culture in several ways, especially through its focus on the relationship between citizenship and religion. It explores how dominant religious groups resourced nationalism as a means of demanding the acculturation of non-dominant groups. It also considers how these non-dominant groups responded to and negotiated with enforced cultural transformation and changed themselves in the process. In this history, religious power and conflict created policy in Washington that propelled evangelization in a frontier classroom. While students were the ultimate targets of this evangelization, encounters between teachers and students impacted the individual and communal lives of both. The resulting space is one in which diverse subjects experimented with theology and ritual in a space infused with unequal and often very violent power imbalances, generating new logics of cultural belonging and Americanization.

---

[1] Reverend Eugene Buechel, "Obituary of Leah Rooks: A Rose of the Bad Lands" (1921) in *The Crossing of Two Roads: Being Catholic and Native in the United States*, ed. Marie T. Archambault, Mark G. Thiel, and Christopher Vecsey (New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 125-127.

[2] David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 28-60; Henry Markowitz, *Converting the Rosebud: Catholic Mission and the Lakotas, 1886-1916* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press: 2018), 16-18, 24-32.

[3] James T. Carroll, *Seeds of Faith: Catholic Indian Boarding Schools* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2000), xix, xxii, xxvi, 61-65.

[4] Carroll, *Seeds of Faith*, xxvi; David Treuer, *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2019), 80-99.

[5] Holy Rosary Mission Records, Bureau of Catholic Indian Mission Records, Department of Special Collections and

University Archives, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI.

[6] *The Indian Sentinel*. Bureau of Catholic Indian Mission Records, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI.

Kathryn Van Zanen
University of Michigan

Good evening. I'm Kathryn Van Zanen, a doctoral candidate in the University of Michigan's Joint Program in English & Education. In my dissertation study, I investigate how writers raised in white evangelicalism push back on the political and religious orthodoxy of the Christian Right. Many of them are doing so via what writer Jia Tolentino calls "central organ of contemporary life"—the internet, or, more specifically, social media. I focus particularly on the rhetorical and ethical decisions raised-evangelical social media users make when "writing back" to their religious communities of origin online.

I'll begin here with my positionality, because my research questions emerged from my own experience, and because I want to acknowledge the ways my social identities shape my motivations, data collection, and analysis. I'm a daughter of the Christian Reformed Church, a majority white denomination, who happened to be writing a dissertation prospectus in the summer of 2020. In the aftermath of Derek Chauvin's murder of George Floyd, fellow alumni of my private Christian high school posted black squares on Instagram and infographics about police brutality and white privilege on Facebook. I grew up with these kids; I know their families; I know that kind of public social media activity would make many of their parents and grandparents uncomfortable, to say the least. I wanted to understand how writers like my classmates thought about the risks, ethical demands, and relational impacts of their social media activity, and how their political leanings and religious affiliations affected one another. I wanted to know: How do millennial American Christians raised in white evangelical communities negotiate their changing religious and political convictions on social media?

I'm exploring that question by following 13 writers, sampled to maximize demographic range, who use Twitter, Facebook, and/or Instagram to "write back" to their religious community of origin. Through interviews and social media observation, I collect data about their relationship to their evangelical past and present connections, when and what they decide to post, or not; how they engage commenters, and why they think they do it. I'm early in that process, and I still have more questions for my participants. But I'd tentatively contend that these writers draw on the rhetorical resources of their evangelical upbringing even when arguing against the political and religious orthodoxy of the Christian Right. They engage traditions of prophetic critique, calling out Christian nationalism, white supremacy, misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, and hypocrisy of various kinds, particularly among religious institutions or people. And they attempt persuasion through testimony, telling stories about how experiences, relationships, or resources shifted their own thinking, or modeled a different political expression of Christian faith.

As a rhetorician, I'm interested in when, how, why, and to what effect writers invoke identity labels like "evangelical," "post- or ex-evangelical," and Christian. More broadly, though, I see this research as one disciplinary vantage point for understanding the changing landscape of religious identity and political affiliation in the United States. It can help us rethink how raised-evangelicals practice religion, how they engage politically, and what futures they imagine for American evangelicalism and its dissenters.