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Introduction

The purpose of the Biennial Conferences on Religion and American Culture is to bring together scholars in the humanities, social sciences, seminaries, and professional schools who study religion in 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. In 2022, we examined the continued impact of the pandemic and the variety of approaches to theorizing and describing religious freedom in a politically and culturally evolving world.

In 2024, we spent more time explicitly discussing the precarity of our fields and departments as well as the unexpected ways that our theorizations and disciplinary spaces impact public policy and debate, the terms we use, and discussion of religion and religious communities. Additionally, sessions focused on the methods and means to attend to groups and communities that have been underexplored or theorized by religious studies scholars. With particular focus on Latinx religion, disability, and spaces where religion is exhibited or encountered by the larger public (like the museum), panelists explored how attention to the embodied and experiential open new venues for discussing the intersection between religion and American culture. 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-changing political themes.

As previously, you will see in these Proceedings, the selected scholars and practitioners heeded our call to be provocative, to push the field, to debate, to learn together, and to imagine new methods and possibilities. The highly-engaged and diverse audience again threw itself into each session with a shared desire to challenge the speakers and help shape the proposed interventions. Sessions were rigorous, thoughtful, and generative, and each session was informed by a collective impulse 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 an intimate, focused conference dedicated to new perspectives informed by various disciplines will invigorate the broader field of American religious studies. In this moment, it is essential that we learn from and challenge one another. These meetings help to build the possibilities and the creativity that emerge from conversation and collaboration, and they open spaces to identify and often sharpen our approach to topics that have been overlooked or minimized by specific fields or disciplinary associations.

It is our continued hope that these conferences will aid serious and sustained conversations among the disciplines and that it will invigorate a much-needed discussion on the limits and possibilities of disciplinary boundaries. Indeed, we believe that our discrete guilds, disciplines, and even departments and graduate programs are enriched by this conversation. The Eighth Conference on Religion and American Culture was held in Indianapolis in June 2024, consisting of a series of roundtable discussions which included presentations by graduate students and top scholars from a variety of perspectives as well as a keynote address open to the public that took place at the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art in connection with its annual Juneteenth celebration. The 2024 Biennial continued the new tradition of beginning with 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 roundtable 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, the keynote, and the graduate student presentations that were read at the conference. What is always missing in these pages, however, are the lively conversations that shaped each session. Indeed, the discussions are one of the highlights of the biennial, as they shape the topics of future biennials as well as seed upcoming research ideas and projects. As usual, new connections were made, and fresh ideas were discovered. We look forward to continuing those conversations in 2026.

We wish to thank a number of people and institutions. First, we are grateful to the panelists who wrote such thoughtful pieces. We asked them to be direct and provocative, and they exceeded our expectations. We are indebted to our colleagues, Peter Thuesen, Sara Imhoff, Andrea Jain, Jessica Nelson, Robert Saler, and Andrew Whitehead who helped to facilitate the sessions. Finally, Lauren Schmidt and Nate Wynne with assistance from Claire Larsen and Ben Bland planned and executed the entire conference, as well as the publication of these Proceedings. As with previous Biennial Conferences, we are deeply grateful for the support of Lilly Endowment, Inc., which contributed generously toward the costs of the meeting and subvention of lodging costs.

Philip Goff and Joseph L. Tucker Edmonds

Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture

Religious Studies Divide: People and Categories

Many humanities programs are facing existential threats, including religious studies. But beyond that there was already a developing rift between works that focus on the “lived religion” of people and works that focus on religion as a socially, even academically, constructed category. What are the stakes here? What is the core of the disagreement? In a field where theory has always been important, this debate at this moment seems especially resonant.

Tazeen M. Ali

Washington University, St. Louis

The study of lived religion is often defined against the traditional study of religion that, for example, might focus on religious elite and their interpretations of sacred texts. It is presented as offering a corrective to studies that focus only on theology or doctrine. By contrast, a lived religions methodology is framed as a way to think about and account for religious actors who have been historically on the margins: women, people of color, queer communities. In other words, lived religions approaches tend to focus on lay people. Lived religion, as a method, is also a way to counter the secularization thesis that as societies become increasingly secular, the significance of religion will necessarily wane, become irrelevant, and relegated to the private sphere. It is additionally used synonymously with “everyday religion,” and it is a way to look for and recognize religion in our contemporary world, in places people might not ordinarily look.

In this sense, a lived religions approach can also be seen as a way to read data and better understand what certain data does or does not tell us. So, for example, rather than interpreting a survey data that indicates a decline in U.S. mosque attendance as a marker of Muslims becoming less religious, we might instead be motivated as researchers to investigate other spaces where religiosity might be playing out. One way to illustrate this is to think about how polling data shows that Muslim women in the U.S. have consistently made up a minority of Friday prayer attendance over the course of the last several decades. To read this data and conclude that Muslim women are less religious than their male counterparts is simply not true. Here, a lived religions approach to interpreting that data would prompt us to look at patterns of marginalization—to examine *why* women’s mosque attendance might be so consistently low. This would then lead us to look to alternative spaces—private spaces outside of formal institutions or other kinds of public spaces. Outside of the U.S., women might not be in the mosques in South Asia, but they take up other public spaces like at shrines where social norms allow for their public presence. In the U.S. context, we see the rise of third spaces that form a kind of alternative to mosques, where typically younger Muslims, male and female, are very much engaged in Muslim religious life.

In my own work, I have looked at alternative mosques that are women-led or queer inclusive, and these are communities that are very much invested in Islam, but you will not find them in conventional mosque settings. This means that these people and their institutions are likely to be overlooked in the study of religion unless we are accounting for other ways of seeing religiosity. My first book, *The Women’s Mosque of America: Authority & Community in US Islam*, was theoretically rooted in a lived religions approach. In it, I investigated how American Muslim women have been cultivating Islamic authority against patriarchal trends in their own religious communities. I used the Women’s Mosque of America (WMA), an all-women mosque in Los Angeles, to look at

broader patterns of authority. This was an ethnographic book: I did fieldwork in LA, conducting interviews with community members, and partaking in participant observation. I prayed at the mosque and participated in social events. I reflected on my own insider status as an American Muslim woman engaging in research on fellow American Muslim women. These elements are key characteristics of lived religions scholarship, so my book very neatly fits into this category.

At the same time, my work also sits at the intersection of the broader debates on lived religion versus a focus on sacred texts or doctrine, because I look at how lay American Muslim read and interpret scriptures in an authoritative way. Traditional Islamic authority is based on the acquisition of formal, specialized knowledge through studying Quran, Hadith, and the classical Islamic legal tradition. However, throughout Muslim societies prior to the twentieth century, women were largely precluded from acquiring scholarly authority. Men almost exclusively exercised the right to interpret scripture in an authoritative way. My book looks at how this community of women in LA, contest existing models of authority that privilege men’s voices and erase women by emphasizing that you do not need to be a scholar to be able to interpret the Quran in an authoritative way. They do this by inviting lay Muslim women who are not scholars to give sermons and interpret the Quran.

So, on the one hand, I write about women, who are often overlooked in traditional approaches to the study of religion that emphasize texts and religious elites. But on the other, I write about a *text-oriented* community of women. They see themselves aligned with the Islamic tradition. They would situate their religious activity as squarely with traditional understandings of Islamic practice, and they are claiming Prophetic precedent. In other words, my work is not looking outside of traditional channels for religiosity, or looking at everyday practices that one might not think to look for religion. These women are making up a mosque community where you *would* expect to find Islam. My work shows that American Muslim women are very invested in scripture. They engage scriptures in an embodied way where they interpret texts through the lens of their experiences as women.

Moreover, appreciating these American Muslim women’s readings of scripture brings into sharper relief the broader implications of what a lived religions approach allows us to see. Even as we think about it as a corrective to studies that have historically focused on a male religious elite and doctrine, lived religion highlights that the way that religious practitioners have engaged scriptures is *always* temporally and culturally bound by their contemporary moral sensibilities. For instance, in my study on the WMA, I am naming the way that they read the Quran as an embodied form of authority. At the same time, I am also highlighting how male readings of the Quran, and particularly those from an Arab male scholarly elite, are universalized.

This universalization is to the extent that a commonsense understanding of their scriptural readings dictates that these are the definitive, objective interpretations of a given part of a text. In reality, however, they are also approaching texts through their embodied experiences, but not naming it as such.

Here, lived religions allows us to highlight how male perspectives are privileged as representative of a universal experience. It draws our attention to the fact that when it is women doing the scriptural interpretations, their engagements are couched as a very particular and as a new perspective. In this sense, lived religions, as a corrective to the traditional study of religion, helps us trouble those binaries between high Islam and folk Islam or popular religion, by suggesting that, *everything* is lived religion. Even when we are thinking about studies that focus on classical texts, a lived religions methodology reminds us that *people* are reading those texts and producing those exegeses.

This ties into larger theoretical debates in the study of religion about how we should think about and define religion, and if we should think about it as something that can universally defined. This is something scholars across subfields are dealing, including in Islamic studies, thinking about, to what extent is Islam and the Islamic tradition coherent categories we can think with? What makes something authentically Islamic? And within Islamic studies, these are the big questions being asked: What is Islam? What is Shariah? What is authority? A lived religions approach that accounts for how these questions are always bound up in communities is an important thread in my own work. Texts never speak for themselves, traditions are developed and sustained in lived communities. This line of inquiry also allows us to center the U.S. as a site to engage these questions in Islamic Studies and moves us away from thinking about Muslims in the United States as peripheral actors rather than as full contributors to American religious life.

Joseph Blankholm

University of California, Santa Barbara

The Snapshot Synthesis of Lived and Critical Religion

The divide between “lived” and “critical” religion is a productive way to describe various debates among those of us who study of religion. I’d like to use my time to describe different versions of this divide because doing so will help us see what we’re arguing about and why it’s important to understand. Though ultimately, I argue for a weaker or more synthetic approach to the divide, I try to avoid making a straw man of the opposition and those on either side.

There are at least two strong versions of the critical religion approach. Both focus on the concept of “religion” and where we get it from. They argue that the concept carries biases with it.

One critical approach derives from a materialist, sometimes Marxist perspective, which treats religion as epiphenomenal, so as a product of material conditions and ostensibly more important forces like politics. In short, “religion” is a variable that’s explained by other, realer variables. Russel McCutcheon and the journal *Critical Research on Religion* are probably good examples of this approach. Another critical approach is more genealogical, and it’s postcolonial or decolonial. Talal Asad is probably a good example, though I think we could also add a book like Brent Nongbri’s *Before Religion*.

With critical religion, we’re trying to combat the perpetuation of subtle hierarchies that have big implications. Critical religion scholars are showing the value of the humanities for opposing discursive violence and undermining the hegemony of empires. The more Marxist version of critical religion redirects our attention to what it thinks really matters, which is power, money, and violence. The genealogical approach investigates what we don’t realize is inside us. Genealogy as a method is basically investigating our discursive inheritance to look for harmful ideas and avoid or overcome them.

Though I worry about any attempt to purify ourselves of an inherited ailment, I absolutely agree that we need to understand who we already are before we start telling others that they’re wrong. This is why I say the Asadians are a little more genealogical; they go a little deeper under the skin. Asad is critical of the “material conditions” perspective, which is grounded in mostly European beliefs about how to know the world and what’s real. Critical religion is a project of self-investigation, for us as individual scholars and for us as a field. It’s important.

I think “lived” religion can work in various ways. If we’re going to oppose it to “critical” religion, it probably means something like the actual stuff of religion or actual religious people. It can also mean something like, “What everyday people think

and do,” as opposed to, “What theologians say people should do.” Like the Asadian approach, but for different reasons, it can challenge our assumptions about what’s real and which ways of knowing the world are valid. Here I’m thinking about the work of Robert Orsi, especially a book like *History and Presence*. The stakes in the critical versus lived religion divide are epistemological and ontological, which is to say, fundamental.

For me, the strong version of lived religion is what allows us to have a conversation with scholars in other fields and with the general public. We’re talking about actual religious people in ways that make everyday sense. We’re specialists in lived religion when we know a lot about people and things that are obviously religious.

There are of course other ways to frame this opposition. For example, we might consider the critical religionists to be debunkers and the lived religion scholars to be caretakers. This way of chopping things up is why we’ve had groups like the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR) and the Study of Religion as an Analytic Discipline (SORAAD) distinguish themselves from the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and schedule their annual meetings right before the AAR. There’s a sense among some scholars of religion that critical means writing about religion and not for it or within it. We might think of this as a fight between the atheists and the skeptics on one side and those who argue for some kind of religious presence on the other, be it the numinous or something more specific, like God, spirits, or ghosts. I’ve written a book that undermines the opposition between religion and nonreligion, so I don’t find this division especially compelling, even though it’s clearly powerful and does a lot of work in the world.

I want to go back now to the opposition between genealogy and actual stuff because I think it’s the most useful. And I want to present a softer version of both sides because it allows for an important synthesis of the two positions.

In this synthesis, the opposition between critical religion and lived religion is between scholars studying the concepts they use and scholars studying the stuff the concepts describe. Flipping it, we have the stuff itself and we have what we call the stuff, or how we distinguish this “religion” stuff from other stuff. Both the actual stuff and the concepts that bound the stuff have their own histories, which of course are histories of violence. And of course these histories—of discourse and what it points to—are histories that overlap. You don’t have religion-the-category without the religious stuff, but also vice-versa.

When we speak or write about “religion,” we’re stepping into both histories at once: the history of the stuff and the history of the concepts we use to name the stuff. We ourselves arrive midstream in this world, as stuff, and we think with categories because we have to. In this synthesis, there is no one who stands outside of discourse. Like Jacques Derrida wrote: “Il ny’a pas de hors-texte.” We’re all standing somewhere. We have to work and think with what we’ve got, in the language or languages in which we can speak or write. We’re using the categories that we inherit to take a snapshot of the stuff as it slides on by. And if we get a good picture, we’ve captured it well.

If we buy this synthesis of the “critical” versus “lived” religion divide, which we might call the snapshot synthesis, then I think the divide is what happens when we’re focusing too much on either our concepts or the stuff they describe. We fight each other when we stop seeing how the other side is also right.

The strong version of the critical religion side is paralyzing. Sometimes it wants us to stop using the term “religion” because it has too much baggage, from Christianity or from something we now confusingly call “secularism.” It can lead to us only writing books and articles about how to think about religion, and we never get to the actual stuff. It can also lead to us having a conversation with ourselves because we refuse the basic terms that everyday people use.

The strong version of the lived religion side is naive. It doesn’t interrogate its categories and assumptions nearly enough. It doesn’t ask itself who it already is. It doesn’t take hold of itself and look at itself from a distance. It allows its assumptions to simply flow through it, and it can only reproduce itself. It can neither see anything other than itself nor anything new.

Both are of course good ways to show you’re an expert. Critical religion is pretty esoteric. It’s very different from how people who aren’t experts talk and think. And lived religion is all about knowing the details of the actual stuff. It demonstrates expertise by inundating with facts or presenting the insider’s perspective sympathetically.

I want to conclude by arguing for the importance of the soft synthesis I’ve offered. If a reporter calls me, I want to draw on critical religion to be able to give them some quick background on the assumptions they don’t realize they hold and how those assumptions are framing their questions. But I don’t want to get stuck in that genealogical work, and I don’t want it to paralyze us. We still need to be able to talk about the religious stuff, and we have to do it in a way that people can understand. If we don’t, then reporters will just call someone else who is less “critical” and can actually talk about religious stuff.

The other thing I think is important about this synthesis is that it makes us better scholars in a scientific sense. Investigating our assumptions helps us control for them. If we’re not accounting

for the smudges on our lens or the effects of light, we’re not going to take accurate observations. And if we don’t understand how we’ve cooked bias into our variables, into our concepts, we’re not going to make accurate assessments. If we don’t know who it is that we arrive as midstream, in this overwhelming flow of discourse we inherit, then we can’t get a hold of ourselves and control for where we stand. We’ll have no idea why we feel so right and so righteous. This critical work is important! But of course, it’s not the work itself. We still have to go and study the actual stuff. We have to get our hands dirty, and we have to lose

our conceptual purity. We have to take a snapshot even though it will only ever capture a version of what for a moment was.

I’m open to the possibility that this double demand is a contradiction. It’s a tension that I feel any time I try to talk to my students or to reporters or to friends who do other things. I don’t think I can resolve it just by saying, “This is a synthesis, so there’s a middle path.” I think it’s more difficult than that. I think it’s the very difficult work of being good at what we do.

I’m always looking for simpler ways to express a lot very quickly. This was me trying to sum up this divide and make sense of it. But I think others have their own ways, and I’m curious to learn about them. I’d also be curious to hear whether you all think that I’ve given these two sides, in their strong and weak versions, a fair shake. Thank you.

Kathryn Lofton

Yale University

Lately I have thought a lot about why Americans revile universities. Americans' confidence in higher education is at an all-time low. A Gallup poll conducted in 2023 found only 36 percent of Americans have "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in higher education, down about 20 percentage points from eight years ago. I thought about that low ebb as I reflected on the question posed to this panel.

Immediately on receipt of any question I have been taught to question its premise. The sign perhaps of a future scholar, future nerd, is someone who precises the question you post. The person who says, "what do you mean by 'you'?" to the question "how are 'you'?" is an ass, but an ass I think shows real signs they were meant to be a researcher and teacher of research. Scholarly findings precise always what we mean when we think we are saying something.

So, when I observe that the distinction the question draws between lived religion and the academically constructed category of religion is one that I resist, I recognize that it is interpersonally annoying and politically risky to make such an observation. Asking for the definition of terms, for a conscientious about verbs and nouns, is what scholars begin their work by doing. Such work is under persistent attack by those in power who do not want this sound, the sound of questioning terms, questioning claims, questioning sources, in their ears as they organize the world for their profits. Scholars rarely speed up the process of monetary gain. However complicit in capital they are, their habits are themselves slow down routines. When you are waiting two years for your refereed report from a field-leading journal you know you are not in line at a McDonald's. When you are negotiating student evaluations or exchanging with the university registrar you are quite aware you are in a system of mass production.

Scholars in this room have a uniquely applicable set of documents and interpretive traditions to explain this dynamic between claims of this-worldliness and arguments for otherworldly abstraction. We sit in this room at the pleasure of a donor whose family's philanthropy emerged in part from a conversion experience at a Billy Graham revival. Evangelicalism is a central subject for any student of religion and American culture; it is also an organizing precept of our financial viability.

I published my first scholarly article in the journal *Religion and American Culture* because that was the journal most strongly aligned with the academic subfield I sought economic survival through researching and teaching. In that work recorded what I learned about late-nineteenth century white evangelical preachers during my dissertation research at the University of North Carolina, namely that those fellas didn't like universities or professors very much at all. "Great preachers cannot be made

by technical pedagogy," explained the evangelist Sam Jones' biographer, George Stuart, "Scholars, debaters, exegetes, and homilists may be produced in universities and theological seminaries, but preachers who reach and save men come from the school of experience which acquaints them with the varied heart throbs generated in the toil, hardships, sacrifices, and sufferings of themselves and their fellows." While mainline Protestants built colleges and advocated their attendance to manufacture civil leaders of a not-yet civil country, evangelicals endorsed "Lessons From The School Of Experience" or the "university of rail splitting."

When I resist the distinction between lived religion and religion as a socially constructed category, it is because I think making such a distinction reveals more the latency of our shared evangelical epistemological heritage as Americanists, and American religionists, than I think it illuminates anything meaningful about religion. Tazeen Ali's *The Women's Mosque of America*, offers vivid depictions of lived religion – of women working and worshipping in mosques. It simultaneously shows how those women engaged the category of religion and understood it as something constructed by their imagination of authority. Joe Blankholm's *The Secular Paradox* carefully conveys how ambivalence about idea and practice organizes much secular community in America, how thinking with the category of religion is for many their lived religion. Our best scholars of religion and American culture show us what we know is true, anthropologically and categorically, namely that there is no practice of religion distinct from its practice of critique.

Why, then, does this divide persist, not only in these rooms but also in congressional hallways and pundit panels? Because imagining that some people protect ideas and other people live real lives has long been a way to undermine the possibility that our lives could be otherwise. Evangelicals throughout American history have waged that personhood is a wrestle with something physical, real, challenging precisely because it is not ruled by human law. "To me," said evangelist Sam Jones, "there is no better recommendation for a preacher than that he has raised the devil." The scholar is a figure who takes up each of these words—me, recommendation, preacher, devil—and asks where they came from, and why they are repeated. Scholars here do work historically connected across many geographies to forms called religion.

The lived religion of the American university is a situation of political attack. That this attack is buttressed by conservatives precisely arguing what scholars do is nothing but the social construction of things, and not real things, the real *real* things, is the reason why I deny the premise of today's inquiries. It is a premise with consequences. I don't think the habit of critique opposes the anthropology of the real as it pertains to religion. I think the real of religion is its critique. As departments of religious studies are being closed, let us not accede it is because of low enrollments or worries about professional outcomes. \

Let us frame those closures as they are politically intended: the silencing of information those in power would rather not be heard.

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Religion and Non-Religion

In a moment when the traditional boundaries between religion, non-religion, and the secular continue to be blurred, the time is ripe to return to these categories, examine emerging theorists and theorizations, and explore their uses and descriptive capacities. The panel will explore their many and varied meanings and how different constructions of religion and non-religion help us narrate contemporary phenomena. How does attention to religion and non-religion help us theorize what social scientists have identified as the “losing of religion,” as well as reconfigure traditional and new religious movements? How do the categories of non-religion and non-belief help thinkers of religion better understand such things as the current white evangelical revival, discourses on race and Afro-pessimism, and rising political partisanship?

Brandon Michael McCormack

University of Louisville

I am a scholar of Black religion and culture. Or, perhaps, a Black Studies scholar of religion and culture. Or, perhaps better still, a scholar committed to a Black study of religion. Or, dare I say, a scholar devoted to a mode of Black religious study. One must carefully consider how one names and introduces oneself, especially in academic spaces such as this, where the nomenclature of scholarly identification is always already fraught and contested. As Yale scholar of religious ethics, Clifton Granby, rightly notes, there are certain anxieties of legitimacy in religious studies, vis-a-vis the social sciences and the humanities. And those anxieties can lead to a certain policing of, or performative posturing of, the proper way to engage in the so-called academic study of religion. I just want to name that at the outset, before I proceed any further.

For more than a decade now, I have held a joint appointment in Black Studies and Religious Studies at a public university, which means that I have lived and felt these anxieties (both my own and those of others that were at times mapped on to me and my work). I have also lived and felt the simultaneously fraught and generative tensions of working at the nexus of Black Studies and the Study of Religion. This felt tension has raised a number of questions for me concerning the theory and praxis of African American Religious Studies or the Black Study of Religion.

Over time, I have come to think about the challenges the nexus of Black Studies and Religious studies presents in terms of questions of the formation, location, and vocation of Black scholars of religion. Each of these terms shapes how we, or at least I, think about the themes of this panel: religion and non-religion, the sacred and the secular, the at times blurred and at times reified boundaries between these categories, what ‘losing religion’ or perhaps ‘losing faith and hope’ might mean in Black communities living in the intense backlash to momentary progress made in the wake of summer 2020, and what ‘belief’ or ‘non-belief’ might mean for discourses on race and Afro-pessimism, or the prospects of Black liberation, or even futurity. Indeed, it is the later set of concerns, within the broader theme of this panel, which most directly intersects with my own work—the ways that the blurring of religion and non-religion, belief and non-belief, inform discourses of race, Afro-pessimism, and struggles for Black liberation. And, as I see it, the ways that we, as scholars of Black religion understand, (dis-)identify, and engage with “religion” and “non-religion,” “belief” and “non-belief,” the “sacred” and the “secular” matters for how we position our intellectual projects in relationship to ongoing Black freedom struggles and contemporary movements for social justice. More importantly, perhaps, is how we, as scholars, envision our particular interventions, and the risks, rewards, and responsibilities (to borrow the language of the *Sacred Writes: Public Scholarship on Religion* program, hosted by Northeastern University) of our interventions, both within the academy and to communities to whom we are accountable, beyond the academy. So, I have become increasingly self-

reflexive of late of how my own sense of formation, location, and vocation informs how I think about such matters. For instance, I am a scholar whose training, or *formation*, was in Vanderbilt University’s Graduate Department of Religion, at the intersection of constructive (theological) and critical (theoretical) approaches to the study of religion, with an emphasis on praxis. This created an inherent tension, and perhaps introduced this anxiety of intellectual legitimacy, which seems to be distinctive to (or at least more pronounced among) scholars of religion. My scholarly formation, as a Fellow in the Theology and Practice program, was intended to lead to a career in theological education. However, my training in History and Critical Theories of Religion (Black Religion and Culture Studies, in particular) lead to my current institutional *location*—at a public research university, in the South, with a primary appointment in Black Studies and a secondary appointment in Comparative Humanities (Program in Religious Studies). When and where and how religion enters that institutional location and departmental/disciplinary configuration creates a different set of tensions that both exacerbate and alleviate the tensions of my intellectual formation. Ironically, these tensions lead to serious questions about intellectual *vocation*. Vocation takes on heightened meaning in theological studies. And this was part of my formation. However, I am also interested in notions of intellectual vocation that emerge from critical theoretical discourses of Black and cultural studies, in which I was also formed. Here, I am thinking specifically of Stuart Hall and Vincent Harding. The latter poses the particular question of the vocation of the Black Scholar.

These questions of formation, location, and vocation frame how I think about the relationship(s) between Black studies and the study of religion. So, I have been reflecting and working through the ways my formation as a particular kind of scholar of religion has shaped how I show up in my particular institutional location, and how my sense of vocation as a Black studies scholar of religion makes demands upon my work. I do this while also attending to a set of theoretical debates and concerns within Black and religious studies around anti-Black violence, death, afro-pessimism, fugitivity, and futurity that took on heightened urgency in the wake of the racial uprisings in summer 2020— and more recently the political assault on Black studies following those uprisings.

So, I have been thinking about the tensions felt in my on intellectual vocation at the University of Louisville, in the wake of the police killing of Breonna Taylor, and the months-long protests that followed. This vocational tension prompted a critical reflection upon the ways the complexities of my intellectual formation and institutional location (at a public research university in a southern city in which I have deep communal and familial ties) led to a conflicting set of demands and constraints upon my voice as a community-engaged scholar committed to public facing work that is accountable to non-

academic communities (religious and non-religious to be sure) and oriented toward racial justice and social transformation. To engage in public facing scholarship (and study) of religion that takes seriously Black studies' mandate towards not only 'descriptive' and 'corrective,' but also 'prescriptive' (see Manning Marable's essay, "Black Studies and the Racial Mountain," 2000) intellectual work aimed at intervening in Black suffering is to risk transgressing a postmodern aversion to normative claims within the humanities in general, and to risk being branded as 'theologians' or 'caretakers' rather than proper 'critics' in the so-called academic study of religion, in particular (see Russel McCutcheon's , *Critics Not Caretakers: Redefining the Public Study of Religion*, 2001). Likewise, to engage in publicly accountable scholarship with non-academic Black religious communities, especially Black church communities, is to risk being seen as insufficiently 'radical' within Black studies. Both situations lead to what philosopher, Calvin Warren, describes as a loss of Black theological imagination, which is to the detriment of Black and religious studies alike, as it deprives scholars and students of intellectual and cultural resources for resisting anti-Black violence and death, and a grammar for imaging other worlds of Black futurity and flourishing.

But what is the relevance of a public facing or community-engaged study of Black religion in a moment when pessimism is, not only a prevailing *mode of analysis*, but, too often, a paralyzing *mood*? Moreover, what is the relationship between the place and space of a public facing and community-engaged study of Black religion, and the possibility of sustaining faith in Black futurity? This is another way of invoking the question of the "location" of the scholar of Black religion vis-à-vis the academy and the community.

To wrestle with these questions, I draw upon the work of Fred Moten to imagine a praxis of "Black religious study" wherein, following Tracey Hucks, African American religion can be understood as both a contested category and a cultural resource capable of sustaining Black endurance and hope in the possibilities of Black futurity. For Moten, Black life is "stolen life" and, signifying upon the spirituals, "stolen lives steal away." As such, Black lives are lived in "fugitivity" or a constant mode of "escape" from the terrors of white supremacy and anti-Black violence. In his essay, "Black Op," Moten describes fugitivity as a "faithful" practice of subversion and insurgence or "Black operatives" that sustains a sense of "Black optimism." While not dismissing the *analysis* of afropessimism (even theorists of afropessimism posit Gramsci's "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will"), Moten insists, "there is cause for optimism as long as there is a need for optimism. Cause and need converge in the bent school or marginal church in which we flock together to be in the name of being otherwise."¹

Thus, I explore Moten's notion of "the bent school" or "marginal church," as a fugitive space capable of sustaining Black operatives and Black optimism (or here we can insert "hope"

and, indeed, "faith"). "The bent school" and "the marginal church" are metaphors for what Moten describes elsewhere as "the undercommons"- a fugitive space simultaneously within and beyond the academy, where subversive intellectual work occurs. As such, I draw together Moten's theoretical "bent school or marginal church" and the historical "hush harbor" - a fugitive Black sacred space where "stolen lives steal away" from anti-Black violence to imagine Black futurity.

This intellectual project took on heightened significance in Louisville, KY a city that experience significant turmoil and trauma in the wake of the state-sponsored "stolen life" of Breonna Taylor. After more than one hundred days of protest and the eventual denial of justice for Breonna, "Black endurance" became difficult to sustain and a certain pessimism marked the voices of young activists, some of whom were traumatized by state surveillance and threats of vigilante violence. As a result, in 2021, I began a project funded by a small grant from Columbia University's Center on African American Religion, Sexual Politics, and Social Justice (CARSS) that explored the significance of the "bent school/marginal church/hush harbor" as various ways of naming/claiming Black (sacred) space (set apart from the white dominant gaze) to explore the possibilities of a fugitive faith (at once sacred and secular) capable of sustaining students, activists, clergy, and everyday folks who were battle worn from fighting for "Justice for Breonna," in the midst of a global pandemic. The project explored how the cultivation/curation of a "bent school, marginal church" as hush harbor for a community-engaged study of Black religion might fortify hope in Black futurity and encourage praxes of care and healing-justice that sustain Black endurance?

This community-engaged service/teaching/research project co-created a series of monthly programming initiatives that utilized Black art, music, film, literature, dance, and other cultural productions as primary resources to explore the relevance of "Black religion and culture." Black, Religious, and Cultural studies were brought to bear upon pressing questions of Black religion, even as communal dialogue informed ongoing debates on the interplay between theory and praxis in the academic study of Black Religion. Participants engaged, monthly, in an art-infused pedagogy of critical and creative reflection on "Black religion" that imagined possibilities for praxis in, for, and beyond the Louisville community.

Most significantly, programming was held off campus, at the Roots 101 African American Museum and in virtual space, via Zoom. Louisville's Roots 101 museum opened in September 2019, and quickly became an organic community gathering space for local organizers, activists, artists, students, and community members, especially those engaged in the ongoing protests for Breonna Taylor. Thus, Roots 101, a Black cultural/sacred space located near the Ohio River, an historical route of Black fugitivity, was an ideal space to "steal away" to explore the significance of "Black faith" in this moment of protracted Black death.

This public facing and community-engaged research project was a way of rethinking and recalibrating my understanding of my

own intellectual formation, location, and vocation as a scholar of Black religion and culture. By engaging the community in matters of theoretical and practical concern, I leaned into my own formation at Vanderbilt as a scholar of Black religion, who was shaped by my fellowship in the Theology and Practice Program, which aimed to form scholars attentive to praxis. By moving beyond the walls of the university to the Roots 101 African American Museum, a Black-owned communal space of gathering, I disrupted the academic location of study to free up space to engage in different modes of inquiry than might be encouraged or allowed within the disciplinary regimes shaping Black/religious studies within the academy. The objective was to lean into the blurred lines between “religion” and “non-religion,” “belief” and “non-belief,” the “sacred” and the “secular” among many activists who had become disillusioned and lost faith in a future of justice or thriving for Black Americans that gave way to a certain pessimism. It is my hope that this project offered a space of Black gathering—a “bent school” or “marginal church”—for students, activists, and members of the community to imagine themselves, their communities, and their futures, otherwise than the deadly anti-Black imaginaries that claimed the life of Breonna Taylor, and countless others. If so, I trust this public facing and community-engaged study of Black religion will have been a worthy mode of Black religious study, or a properly Black study of religion, as the case may be.

Jacqui Frost

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“Rethinking the Consequences of Religious Decline”

The United States has seen a dramatic decline in participation at traditional religious institutions over the past few decades, and today around 30% of Americans report “no religious affiliation” on our national social science surveys (Pew 2024). I will address multiple aspects of the prompt by arguing that we need to pay better attention to the diversity *within* this growing nonreligious population if we really want to understand what this recent religious decline means for our theories of secularization and religious change, as well as how it might affect things like political partisanship, discourses on race, and societal wellbeing more generally. I offer my thoughts on how we can best leverage our analyses of this growing nonreligious population to better understand the causes and consequences of these important religious changes.

In many of our foundational social scientific theories, the loss of religion is theorized as being largely a negative trend, for both individuals and society, because it is often assumed that religious decline will coincide with a loss of greater meaning, a loss of shared morality, and a loss of community-mindedness and social trust. Philosopher Charles Taylor calls this the “subtraction story” of secularization – a story of moving away from stable social identities, communities, and religious beliefs, and moving toward a hollow and meaningless secular modernity that is assumed to leave individuals feeling anxious, anomic, and socially isolated (Taylor 2007). There has also historically been an assumption that the secular individuals and organizations that result from religious decline are largely homogenous in their values, in their sociodemographic characteristics, and in their orientations toward religion.

A primary example of this assumption is the increasingly popular survey category of the religious “nones”. For decades now, social science researchers have been conducting analyses in which they group all nonreligious people into one category – the nones – and they then use that as a reference category with which to compare to a range of more specific religious subgroup categories such as Christian, Muslim, or Jewish. However, there is a growing subfield of nonreligious studies scholars who are showing that the nonreligious are far from a homogenous group who are united simply by their lack of religion, and this research shows that collapsing all nonreligious people into one category leads to inaccurate conclusions about the beliefs, values, and practices of nonreligious people.

In survey research I’m doing in this area with Penny Edgell, for example, we have shown that examining variation among the nonreligious sheds new light on longstanding questions regarding how being nonreligious impacts things like rates of civic engagement and self-reported health. When compared to the religious, nonreligious people are often found to be

less civically engaged, less healthy and happy, and less likely to find meaning and purpose in life. However, research in this area typically fails to account for differences among the nonreligious themselves. The nonreligious have taken on a variety of different labels and identities to represent their worldviews – such as atheist, agnostic, humanist, “spiritual but not religious”, and “nothing in particular” –, they have a wide range of often conflicting stances on social and political issues, and they are creating an increasing variety of explicitly secular activist and community groups to cultivate and affirm these nonreligious identities and values. And that this diversity matters when attempting to assess the impact that religious decline has on individual and societal wellbeing.

For example, in an analysis of rates of volunteering among the nonreligious, we find that atheists and the “spiritual but not religious” are just as likely to volunteer for social and community groups than are the religious, but that low rates of volunteering among agnostics and “nothing in particulars” often drives the negative relationships found when these nonreligious subgroups are combined into a single reference group measure and compared against the religious (Frost and Edgell 2018). Thus, breaking out these different identity groups really matters. In another analysis, we find that self-reported health and happiness among the nonreligious is strongly mediated by the length of time someone has been nonreligious (Frost, Edgell, and Miller, working paper). We find that people who have recently become nonreligious tend to be more anxious and less happy than people who have been nonreligious for a long time. But we also find that those who have always been nonreligious are just as healthy and happy as religious people. And in a third study we recently published in *Sociology of Religion*, we find that the nonreligious are not any less likely than the religious to find life meaningful, they just find meaning in a different set of beliefs and practices than do the religious, which is something that is often missed when meaning gets conflated with religiosity or spirituality in our survey measures (Edgell, Miller, and Frost 2023).

These findings suggest that as we continue to analyze and theorize the causes and consequences of religious decline in the United States, or the “losing of religion” as the prompt for this discussion put it, we need to move beyond assumptions of homogeneity and universality. Religious decline will not be universally bad for health or civic engagement or political polarization, but it will not be universally good either. The nonreligious are just as varied and complex in their beliefs and politics as are the religious, and they have a wide range of ideologies and identities that are being shaped and reinforced by a growing field of explicitly nonreligious organizations. And if we start to examine these ideologies and organizations more closely, rather than simply assuming

a homogenous and “hollow” secularity, we can gain a better understanding of both their positive and negative effects.

One example comes from work I and others have done to examine the growth of “secular congregations” in the U.S. like the Houston Oasis and The Sunday Assembly (Frost 2023; Smith. In these organizations, nonreligious people mimic religious rituals and organizational forms to celebrate and ritualize their shared nonreligious beliefs and values around science, humanism, empiricism, and individualism. And research shows that these secular congregations are often successful at getting nonreligious people involved in their larger communities through volunteerism and social activism and that they have a significant positive effect on self-reported wellbeing (Price and Launay 2018).

However, these nonreligious organizations are not universally good for all nonreligious people. Much like America’s religious organizations, this growing field of nonreligious organizations is heavily segregated by race. The majority of atheist and humanist organizations in the U.S. are predominantly White, and their goals and values are often incongruent with the goals and values of nonreligious people of color. In his qualitative analysis of Black atheist organizations, sociologist Daniel Swann finds that mainstream White atheist organizations typically focus on issues related to church/state separation and religious critique, but they largely ignore issues of social justice and racial inequality (Swann 2020). As a result, many nonreligious people of color feel excluded from atheist and humanist organizations, and they do not get as many social or individual benefits from participation in them.

So, while recent research shows that the nonreligious tend to be more socially liberal and more likely to support racial equality than many religious groups, research like Swann’s that accounts for diversity among the nonreligious tells a more complicated story. Even though most atheist organizations support racial justice in their politics on paper, they often fail to create spaces that are truly inclusive in practice, forcing people of color to create their own secular communities. It is also the case that some nonreligious individuals and organizations promote explicitly harmful discourses around race and religion. Religious studies scholar Donovan Schaefer recently argued that New Atheist authors like Richard Dawkins are espousing what Schaefer calls a “secular conspiracy theory” in which science has become an error-free belief system that is wielded to denigrate religious people, especially religious people of color (Schaefer 2022).

Taken together, my argument is that to understand the consequences of religious decline in the United States, we need to focus less on making stark comparisons between the religious and the nonreligious and we instead need to focus more on understanding variations in nonreligious beliefs, politics, and organizations in the same ways we have done with religion. In doing so, we start to see how nonreligion can operate in many of the same ways as religion does – by providing a worldview through which people can affirm shared

identities, cultivate shared beliefs and rituals, and participate in organizations that shape social norms and policies. However, also similar to religion, nonreligious worldviews can promote a wide range of *different* beliefs and politics. And this means that gaining a better understanding of how the growing nonreligious population is impacting social progress around racial justice, political polarization, and inclusive communities will require that we move beyond the “subtraction story” of secularization and start to theorize how the growth of new and substantively meaningful nonreligious subcultures might help or hinder social progress in different ways.

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“Neoliberal Colonization of the Lifeworld: Shaping and Squeezing out the Sacred?”

In recent years, I’ve turned my attention to what a shift from congregational religion to spirituality means for public life in America.

As a professor and mom, it has been striking to me how, despite my fascination and care about spirituality, personally and professionally, I’ve struggled, in my own multi-ethnic and multi-religious family, to sufficiently expose my own kids to rich religious and spiritual practices and traditions, as my family growing up did for me. There just does not seem to be enough hours in the day to do it all: maintain all my professional responsibilities, support and spend quality time with my family, do the laundry piling up around the house, spend time with extended family and friends, and the list goes on.¹

In an individualist American society dominated by greedy organizations (Coser 1967) demanding ever more productivity, lacking extended family support for many who move for their jobs, with increasing expectations of intensive parenting, and rampant technological escapism, I wonder, are others neglecting their own and their families’ spiritual cultivation as much as I am? To what extent have the dominant organizational structures and cultures – from our workplaces, schools, children’s activities, and aspects of state regulation and surveillance – colonized our lives? Is this a privileged problem, or might the strains perhaps be even worse for those working in more precarious jobs with “flexible” shifts around the clock?

Neoliberal Colonization of the Sacred Lifeworld?

These ruminations led me back to Jurgen Habermas’s (1987) “colonization of the lifeworld” (391). I draw not upon Habermas’ entire theoretical social system which I think can use some tweaks and updates taking into account intersectional elements of inequality and Western colonialism– but rather from the general contours of his early overarching critique. By doing so, I hope to provoke theoretical questions that others can further pursue, in hopes of better understanding recent changes in the religious, spiritual, and secular cultural landscapes under late capitalism, since the 1970s.

Habermas describes society as composed of a system and a lifeworld. His system includes the economy and the state, which are subsystems centered around purposive-rational action that mediated by power and money, which he describes as “delinguistified media” (1987: 184). He suggests such systems and their instrumental logic have gained dominance in modern societies, independent from communication in the lifeworld (Iser 2017; Rosa 2017). The lifeworld he describes

as the site of communicative action oriented by intersubjective understanding (Habermas 1987). Instead, the system, he theorizes has grown into “more and more complex networks that no one has to comprehend or be responsible for” which is “unhinged from communicatively established consensus” (Habermas 1987: 184). Habermas theorizes this incursion of the economic and political system into realms he distinguished as the lifeworld, as the colonization of the lifeworld (1987). He characterized this modern shift as occurring in the wake of processes of “secularization of bourgeois culture” and differentiation (Habermas 1987: 196).

With the rise of neoliberalism and the speeding up of capitalism since the 1970 (Reich 2007), economic culture has expanded across education, medicine, leisure, and religion and spirituality via emphases on achievement, productivity and the responsibility of the individual to uphold one’s body and wellbeing, motivation, and sustenance (Jain 2014; Kucinkas and Stewart 2022; Lofton 2011; 2019; Roof 2001).

Amid this “technicizing of the lifeworld,” (Habermas 1987: 183), much social value and communicative capacity may be lost. Communicative action, Habermas argues binds society through coordination, shared meaning, solidarity, socialization and cultural reproduction, as well as contributes to individual “ego strength, or capacity for action” (Rosa 2017: 638). As people come to define and organize their lives through categories learned at work, their sense of self, and abilities of communicating and thinking may atrophy (Iser 2017).

Declining Congregational Power’s Impact on Religiosity and Spirituality?

Much ado has been made about how in the United States, congregational religion is weakening. As Pew (2022) reports, since 1972, self-identified Christians have declined from 90% to 63% in 2021. Weekly or more religious attendance in the United States has also now dropped below half the country (PEW 2019). This all raises questions about religiosity and spirituality in the US that extends far beyond the religious economy school of thinking premised in congregations (Finke and Stark 1989; Warner 1993).

I wonder about how this all affects peoples’ lived religious and spiritual life under fast capitalism and a gig economy, when there seem to be no brakes on capitalism, and a neoliberal culture of productivity and achievement seems to increasingly guide the lifeworld across institutional fields. Along these lines, I pose below three questions I hope scholars in religious studies and the sociology of religion continue to pursue, and my emergent answers to them.²

1. With the weakening of congregations as a locus of religious and spiritual activity, how might late capitalism and other secular fields influence religion and spiritual quests differently?

For many people, the market has now taken over the calendar. Whereas in predominantly Christian countries, Sunday has long been recognized as a day of rest and religious/spiritual activity, with the rise of information technology and the importance of profit-seeking, for many, work has more porous bounds – or for some little bounds. In a paper currently under review by Evan Stewart and I, we find that the employed engage in less religious practices than those not employed or retired. We also found the self-employed, and the temporarily unemployed were particularly likely to do spiritual practices.

Questions also remain on how a shift to a gig-economy, and more flexible work, shape religious and spiritual accessibility and possibility. In our paper, Stewart and I found, interestingly, those working split shifts engaged in more religious and spiritual practice than day shift workers, while those working night shifts were more likely to do spiritual practice, suggesting structure of work does likely impact the kind of sacred practice one does.

Work, for some – and elites in particular – is becoming increasingly welcoming of spirituality and religiosity. With the blending of religious, spiritual and secular institutional spaces, new hybrid and syncretic forms and practice spaces are possible. Others, however, raise questions about how, in secular hierarchical organizations, practitioners can attenuate religious elements, as cultures are adapted to get and fit in (Islam et al. 2022; Kucinskas 2018). Individualistic and/or for-profit interests may replace prior religious values and purposes (Chen 2022).

In the spirit of Habermas, I also wonder if there has been a weakening of communicative action in spiritual and religious lifeworlds in light of the shift to profit and power-driven delinguistified media from the economy, state, (Habermas 1985) and technological developments (Haidt 2024)? In a study a team of my students conducted across the country in 2018, we found that many students at a select liberal arts college struggled to discuss spirituality and religion due to their thin vocabulary on these subjects (Kucinskas 2022). Interestingly, respondents from across the northeast similarly seemed to have a weak spiritual vocabulary, which contrasted from that of those interviewed in Santa Barbara, California.

2. What does it mean if religious authorities' influence weakens, and responsibility of attaining the bundle of goods formerly offered by religious institutions shifts to the individual – and a busy individual in an attention economy – at that?

Others note how, rather than gaining a package of offerings from a religious institution, the goods provided by religion and/or spirituality have been unbundled (Thompson 2024). Linda Woodhead (2016) similarly notes how religion is “all shook up,” and “complexly, pluralistically, religious and secular even

when they are within a single institutional domain” (43). These boundaries have blurred, and people no longer fit the categories of religious identification the state, academics and religious leaders presume (Woodhead 2016).

Given this shift away from congregational religious authority and membership, I wonder if those disaffiliating or unaffiliated may miss out on the communal elements of vibrant congregations, or the multiplex ties many Americans historically had through their congregations, embedding them in their neighborhoods and communities.

I also wonder if, without social and normative pressure via strong community memberships, those inclined toward the sacred might face more challenges in maintaining consistent spiritual practices, and the depth of their commitments to such practices and related values.

Might the religious nones instead opt for more convenient options, but not benefit from all the features of congregational religion? For example, the nones, or even less religiously embedded, may turn instead to meditation apps, streamed yoga classes, or simply go for a walk in nature on their own when they have time to do so? Or might they just doomscroll on their phones?

3. How do these changes create new opportunities for growth of new spiritual and religious experiences and vehicles? Where and how are these emerging and what are they accomplishing?

It is also important to recognize that this unbundling of religion creates new opportunities for developing new sacred collective vehicles which may better meet the needs of some people (Kucinskas and Stewart 2022). In a turn from formal religious organizations, decolonized spiritual pursuits can be developed, with stronger ties to the natural environment. More inclusive vehicles can be created for those who have been alienated by the church, like some women, LGBTQ people and those non-heteronormative family structures. Innovative spiritual and religious groups can also better bridge racial and ethnic groups, or queer the sacred, bringing in more levity and humor (Wilcox 2018).

Those with challenging schedules or who are geographically mobile may also seek more short-term pop-up forms of connection to the sacred and others. Or they may take advantage of digital possibilities of connection, where they can also develop stronger networks across the world. Such emergent forms may also facilitate connections and secular forms of transcendence through music, art, or sports, rather than through explicit worship of a higher being, which may perhaps, carry some similar benefits as conventional religious membership (Kucinskas and Stewart 2022).

Scholars are starting to catalogue many intriguing new forms of community, transcendence, and the sacred – whatever that may mean to different people – as evident in Harvard's Sacred Design Lab, Wendy Cadge's Chaplaincy Innovation Lab at Brandeis, or the Springtide Research Institute.

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Juneteenth, Black Religion, and the Ambiguities of Freedom

Several discourses in the humanities are challenging how we talk about freedom and its relationship to religion. During the keynote presentation, Dr. Keri Day will explore on the fraught relationship between religion and freedom, especially Black freedom. Her recent work has foregrounded the Azusa Street Revival of 1906 and the complex questions that emerge when talking about Black freedom. She suggests that Azusa's non-statist, apocalyptic account of Black freedom troubles and complicates the assumption that directing Black energies and political agency towards nation-state building primarily secures the ends of Black freedom. Dr. Day will highlight these complex questions that emerge when discussing Black freedom, from political agency to securing liberation and flourishing.

Keri Day

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Freedom in the United States is both an ideal and a social practice. This country was purportedly founded on the notion of democratic freedom as a challenge to monarchial and authoritarian forms of sovereignty. Early America's intense quest for freedom as an ideal and social practice can be seen through countless political speeches, writings, sermons, music, art, and more.

Yet, freedom has a shadowy side. We certainly can see this shadowy side as this country was formed, witnessed through the violence and genocide of Native Americans. From the transatlantic slave trade to early slave economies, black lives and bodies were also objectified and exploited, enslaved, and packaged as commodities to sell on slave markets. Even when the Emancipation Proclamation and the Period of Reconstruction led to several prosperous black business communities and unprecedented black political representation in government, black communities would experience a loss of these gains through the establishment of Jim Crow, legally inaugurated by *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Yet, black leaders nevertheless appealed to the possibility and power of freedom as an ideal and social practice in this country.

This week, many groups are reflecting on Juneteenth. This holiday is complex however with respect to black freedom. Juneteenth is a day for black communities to celebrate emancipation from slavery as well as black resilience amid this history. Juneteenth is also a moment to celebrate the cultural pride and creativity of black communities, gesturing towards the idea that blackness was more than the logics of antiblack violence. Yet for me, this commemoration also represents the *hold* antiblack racism nevertheless has on black lives. Even when such formal political freedom was legally granted to blacks, it had little to do with political enfranchisement, economic equity, and cultural respect. Freedom is a *fraught* ideal and social practice for blacks within the United States. In celebrating Juneteenth, this sobering, complex history reminds us of this reality.

There is also a fraught relationship between religion and freedom, especially black freedom. Historically in the US, religion has long been Janus-faced in nature, used to both undermine freedom *and* simultaneously cultivate practices of freedom. Several contemporary discourses in the humanities note this complex, even contradictory relationship between freedom and religion (crip theory, critical black studies, queer negativity, and so forth). My recent work has turned to early Pentecostalism and the complex questions that emerge when talking about *black freedom*. Religious scholars (including scholars of black religion) have historically interpreted early Pentecostal religion as apolitical, withdrawn, accommodationist, and otherworldly. They have painted early Pentecostalism with a broad stroke. However, certain strands of early Pentecostalism were defiant and politically potent such as the Azusa Street Revival of 1906 in Los Angeles, CA.

As we celebrate Juneteenth, I think that the Azusa movement offers critical reflections on the complexities and ambiguities associated with black freedom against the contemporary horizon of antiblack violence and an increasingly fascist American state.

In my keynote, I foreground the Azusa Street Revival of 1906 as a case study in order to explore the fraught relationship between religion and freedom, especially black freedom. I want to suggest that Azusa's non-statist, apocalyptic account of black freedom troubles and complicates the assumption that directing black energies and political agency towards nation-state building *primarily* secures the ends of black freedom (being liberation or flourishing). In my book *Azusa Reimagined: A Radical Vision of Religious and Democratic Belonging*, I argue that the religious consciousness and material practices of Azusa embodied a different account of freedom not in service to America's nation-state building but put in service to a "politics of re-existence." Freedom is often conceptualized and engaged as the grounding activity that is made possible in and through the resources and ends of nation-state building. The Azusa community resisted this liberal assumption and embodied a non-statist account of freedom through its apocalyptic consciousness and agency.

I try to unfold my suggestion here by offering the backdrop of early industrialism and the contestation over practices of black freedom within which the Azusa community came to voice. I then examine the significance of Azusa's apocalyptic political agency against this backdrop. I will conclude by asking what Azusa's non-statist practice of black freedom teaches us in our troubled political moment.

Secular Progressive Millennialism: Black Freedom and Nation Building

At the start of the twentieth century, the question of black freedom was hotly debated with respect to a burgeoning industrialism in America. Early market and technological industrialism and its secular progressive millennialism was most pronounced at the start of the twentieth century. A progressive millennialism is an "outlook that expects society on Earth to be increasingly purified and perfected."¹ There have been religious and secular views of millennialism in which a divine authority (God) or a secular suprahuman force (capitalism or socialism) achieves this perfected society. Progressive millennialists during the early industrial period believed that collective economic and political salvation and progress would occur through market and scientific advancements. One could see this view most fully expressed at the US World Fairs and Expositions that dominated the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Philadelphia World Fair of 1876 and the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893 were illustrative of this progressive millennialism. World fairs were seen as symbols of the growing scientific, market, and technological innovation that would mark America as an increasingly wealthy nation. America also sought to export this progressive millennial view

to other nations through increasing market and technological activity. The Chicago and Philadelphia fairs allowed the US to announce its gospel of economic and political progress, proclaiming that economic prosperity and political democracy would be central to eradicating poverty, ignorance, and disease in the US and around the world.

Through various ethnological exhibitions, religious speeches, and political ceremonies, the Chicago and Philadelphia fairs touted the idea that *European civilization* would bring economic and political salvation to other peoples around the world. And these people around the world were interpreted as primitive, savage and uncivilized. At these world fairs, one would encounter the “primitive” handicrafts and artifacts of Native American tribes in a way that gestured towards these communities being technologically backward, savage, chaotic, and homely – in need of culture refinement and political sophistication.ⁱⁱ One would also encounter people from the kingdom of Dahomey, arranged in a kind of human zoo, doing war dances, which allowed guests to infer that these Africans’ participation in war dances reflected their bestial and morally reprobate nature.ⁱⁱⁱ These exhibitions allowed white ethnologists and US political and economic leaders to justify practices of colonialism and exploitation going on around the world. Because such communities were barbaric (so the colonial narrative went), white leaders affirmed *why* Christian Anglo-Saxon nations were needed to bring civilization and moral light to these lands and people. Countless barbaric images from world fairs legitimated the evolutionary idea of progress in which humanity could be seen moving from more primitive ways of being as embodied in the African and the Asian to more civilized modes of being, most illustrative of Europe and its Anglo-Saxon identity (which marked America). At these world fairs, this linear movement towards progress was captured in the way European and white American market and scientific achievements were displayed as economic and cultural answers to moral chaos, global poverty, urban violence, racial/ethnic division.

Of course, this white racist view of civilization legitimized slavery in the US and justified seeing black labor as key to securing this new industrial Golden Age of wealth and abundance. Many white and black businessmen in the South saw black labor as central to helping the South shift from an agricultural to industrial economy. The Atlanta Exposition of 1895 (along with other world fairs in New Orleans, South Carolina, and Tennessee) depicted the “New South” as a major contributor to the development of domestic and foreign markets. Architects of these Southern fairs wanted to ask how they might achieve racial harmony in this New South in light of newly emancipated black communities. More importantly, white business tycoons wanted to show how racial hierarchy could be in service to economic development and social order in response to the racial unrest of the Civil War and Reconstruction periods. These Southern financial leaders wanted to bring industrial productivity and wealth to the South through discovery of markets, new supplies of natural resources, and “creative” ideas about labor.^{iv}

Some black leaders *and* ministers supported this white Southern industrial vision of progress, arguing that black freedom *could* be secured through this market vision. For certain black ministers, market faith was seen as an answer to black disenfranchisement and oppression. For instance, Bishop Wesley Gaines encouraged blacks to avoid all politics and aspire to industry and thrift to gain the respect of whites. He believed that providing a dependable labor force for this burgeoning industrialism in the South would demonstrate to whites that blacks were productive, moral citizens.^v

Similarly, Black cultural and political leaders such as Booker T. Washington also felt that black freedom was tied to African American’s contribution to free markets. Washington knew that this kind of economic development would require a large agriculture and industrial labor force at low costs. Washington sought to offer a guarantee to white businessmen that blacks could be best suited for this large labor force. At the Atlanta Exposition, Washington reiterated why black laborers were central to American economic progress and how this could help maintain social order.^{vi} To be fair, Washington sought to expand black possibilities in a racially violent environment where blackness was simply a threat to white society. However, other black leaders such as WEB Dubois and Ida B Wells challenged Washington’s collusion with this racist, industrial vision.

Predictably, white business leaders capitalized on Gaines and Washington’s sentiments. Some white business leaders reported that they saved over hundreds of thousands of dollars by using chain-gang labor to “excavate about a million yards of earth during the early months of construction”^{vii} for southern fairs, a nice projection of what might be possible when engaging industrial development in the South. One southern newspaper remarked that the labor situation in the South is more agreeable, as one notices that labor strikes that happen in the North are unknown to happen in the South.^{viii} The racist brutality and violence that blacks experienced in the south were well known. Blacks typically didn’t strike or protest in the South as this could invite lynching or violence against one’s entire family. Unfortunately, this ‘southern “labor fact” was celebrated as an economic incentive for Northern financiers to invest in development in the South. Because the South could keep blacks in their place, northern financial leaders invested.

As one can see the question of black freedom during this time is complicated and messy. On the one hand, some black leaders embraced black freedom *through markets* in considering the dearth of possibilities for newly emancipated black communities. One could argue that Booker T. Washington was simply a political realist and wanted black communities to exercise their political and economic freedoms within a protracted and racist national environment. On the other hand, one might ask if blacks were truly free under these industrial conditions of neo-slavery, what scholars refer to as racial capitalism – a point that Ida B Wells insisted must be heard during this conversation at World fairs. Black freedom is a *contested* ideal and social practice among black leaders themselves and for me, begs these

questions: what is freedom? And what are the ends of black freedom – what should black freedom be directed toward?

Azusa's Apocalyptic Agency and the Question of Freedom

Azusa's political agency might be understood against this backdrop on the ambiguities and complexities of black freedom. The Azusa Revivals' countercultural religious life to the racist *habitus* of white America has been written about over the last several decades. Azusa gathered people across racial lines, something considered unlawful in many states in the US. Just consider black men laying hands on white women in a white supremacist cultural context where black men could get lynched for even looking at a white woman. Azusa also practiced gender parity, allowing women in record numbers to preach, pastor, and lead in churches (in fact, a record number of women in Baptist and Methodist churches left their churches to be authorized by the Azusa movement). Moreover, class lines were blurred as impoverished black workers led out in this religious community, shepherding the religious experience of even well-to-do whites. Police were constantly called to "watch" the Azusa community, which reflects the anxiety LA residents experienced when encountering the "lawlessness" of the Azusa community.

Yet, there is another aspect of Azusa's countercultural religious life that has received scant attention. Azusa's apocalyptic political sensibility *might be seen as a response* to this progressive market millennialism and its antiblack practices, which frustrated prospects of black freedom. The Azusa community did not believe or trust in the American state's promises of liberty and equality because these very promises made possible forms of neo-slavery (being Jim Crow laws and forms of racial capitalism). Most black leaders who were part of Azusa would have experienced first-hand the crushing effects of Reconstruction and the exploitation of black lives and labor during early industrialism as seen through economic endeavors such as the world fairs. The American state and its political institutions created and sustained the economic and political exploitation of black communities and therefore could not save them.

Azusa's suspicion of the American state and its promises associated with nation-building can be seen at the site of citizenship. In the United States, citizenship has been seen as a symbol of freedom, but such freedom has also been linked to white purity. As a matter of law in the US, citizens or political subjects were propertied white men who enjoyed voting rights, housing, employment and more. Political freedom and economic liberties were distributed according to white racial hierarchy. Although whites would have argued that the "separate but equal" clause did secure black citizenship, this clause which maintained Jim-crow segregation, treated blacks as outsiders and effectively denied them basic resources accorded to citizens such as fair education, free speech, social mobility, fair housing, and so forth.

While some black leaders tried to reclaim black citizenship through the courts and capitalist endeavors associated with

early industrialism (Booker T. Washington), other black communities casted a suspicious and skeptical eye toward the political discourse of citizenship itself. Discussion of black citizenship in black educated communities was tied to a politics of respectability. A black person could only be treated as a respectable political subject by assimilating into white Christian and political modes of becoming. Many black members of Azusa rejected American white Christian modes of being. For instance, because Azusa's liturgical life was grounded in slave religious practices that white and black educated communities believed were pagan, savage, and antiquated, Azusa's religious performativity undermined a black politics of respectability. The white dominant view of citizenship could not make room for the *religious subjectivity* of blacks who engaged slave religious practices. Azusa members knew this and so held with suspicion becoming a white citizen-in-the-making as the key to black salvation and freedom.

Also recall that citizenship was tied to one either owning property or profiting from the racial-capitalist institutions of the US. Ironically, part of the history of antiblackness in US was that black people *were* forms of property. Scholar Matthew Desmond has documented how mortgages were secured in slavery: by using enslaved people as collateral for mortgages.^{ix} This method was used centuries before the home mortgage became a defining characteristic of American capitalism. Historically, most lending was based on human property, as land wasn't worth much during the early days of slavery. As a result, the citizen wasn't even applied to black people. And this propertied view of black life and labor persisted into the industrial period, complicating appeals to citizenship. These distorted histories of citizenship were part of the deep grammar of the American state and persisted into the twentieth century. Blacks continued to experience the violently exclusionary and signifying practices of American citizenship.

Through Azusa's apocalyptic consciousness and agency, these members noted the contradictions of American citizenship. In *Azusa Reimagined*, I ask: what if we understand the premillennialism (or apocalypticism) of Azusa's participants as, at least in part, due to a growing disillusionment of the false promises of this progressive millennialism, which promised a new Golden age of peace and prosperity based on markets? What if Azusa's Pentecostal mandate to "separate oneself" from the world was not just about spiritual and moral regeneration but also about exposing America's false millennial promises of peace and prosperity, which were built on black exploitation and degradation? There is no doubt that Azusa's apocalyptic premillennial view expressed a religious expectation of Jesus Christ's second coming and the last judgement, which would end existing society. However, in some ways, this premillennial view might also be interpreted as a critique of white bourgeois culture, which sustained antiblack forms of capitalist exploitation. Azusa pre-millennial view might be understood as an immanent critique of America's racist industrial society and its progressive millennial view. In this case, Azusa's apocalyptic view radically disrupts, exposes, and calls out the institutional

realities of racial hierarchy and gross power relations. Azusa's apocalypticism should be historicized from within the religious and secular millennial sentiments of American democracy and its capitalist endeavors'.

The American state and its democratic ideals saw society moving in a linear direction toward progress. In contrast, the early Azusa community interpreted history as shot through with the tragic and catastrophic, necessitating an apocalyptic engagement with the apparatus and ideologies of the modern American state. For Azusa members, the modern history of the US was shot through with catastrophe. One could not, they might say, remedy the existential and social problems of this age through the political instruments of the current order. For Azusa, it would take divine interruption – a divine judgment of nation-states and their cultural productions of evil.

Although Azusa members were skeptical of their political agency being directed towards the resources and ends of the American state, these members did fashion a “politics of re-existence” that allowed them to refuse how the state marked them: as apolitical, primitive, uncivilized, and savage. Instead of appealing to the state and its political instruments, Azusa members confronted systemic practices of disenfranchisement and marginalization not at the site of state institutions but *through everyday aesthetic practices and senses*. These practices attempted to “talk back” and defy white racist ideologies that dehumanized and degraded black life. For example, Azusa's everyday religious and aesthetic practices of tarrying and laying on of hands among people across diverse racial and gender identities revealed and countered the racially segregated postures of state institutions.

I write about tarrying as a religious practice with affective political power. Although time does not allow me to offer a thick description of tarrying, tarrying was a religious ritual of communal prayer *enacted through the body* and offered a different understanding of sovereignty, power, and intimacy. This community did not see the American state and its political institutions as the *sole holders of power*, nor did they accept America's exercise of racist sovereignty over their lives. Instead, through tarrying, this community appealed to a religious vision of sovereignty that disrupted and defied racist, classist and misogynistic forms of belonging. These democratic religious rituals and practices like tarrying might be seen as modes of self-determination and resistance actualized through diverse bodies (an important point I will return to), which sought to remake the self-understanding of this community away from (or at least in tension with) antiblack logics. They would not be citizens-in-the-making but would seek self-determination and meaning through their own religious modes of becoming.

Azusa did not embrace or offer grand promises of political liberation from racial-capitalist structures because they knew the fragile, antiblack nature of America's political institutions. Instead, Azusa cultivated religious practices of freedom through which its members could self-actualize democratically, even if imperfectly, within a religious community. Practicing freedom

was a way for Azusa members to assert their own religious and moral agency against racial violence and economic injustice, so that *this democratic assertion of moral and religious agency was the political victory*. Most poor blacks (and even some immigrants) who were part of this revival refused being citizens in the making or “the human” in the making, according to white capitalist society. As I note in *Azusa Reimagined*, “They were people who survived, even joyously, on the assumption that the statist instruments of domination will always belong to somebody else and so they never aspired to control them, and that these instruments could not save them.”^{xi}

Implications for Today: Diverse Practices of Freedom

What does Azusa's non-statist practice (account) of black freedom teach us in our political moment? What alternative rhythms and spaces are present to people who choose not to thread life through formal political institutions? To what ends should black freedom be directed? I offer two implications of my argument.

A first implication of Azusa's non-statist practice of freedom is this: Their non-statist practice of freedom represents a *somatic account of freedom* and political action, as black, white, Latinx and other bodies move beyond the Habermasian model of “speech acts” or discursive deliberation, which is often understood as proper political action in the public sphere. If you recall, I mentioned tarrying and how it positioned unlikely bodies (white and black bodies) together in ways that violated segregation laws and ideologies of the day. Political acts are often understood in relation to the discursive capacities of particular groups or individuals (what people or groups say within the deliberative, democratic political process or within formal institutions). One is seen as acting politically when one can enter the fray of political debate to participate in formal democratic decision making. However, there are many ways to exercise political voice. People can politically “speak” with their bodies. Unlikely bodies at Azusa assemble in public against American political practices of segregation in response to the systemic evil of the day. It's not so much what Azusa members said per se; it is what they *did* –how they assembled their diverse racial and gendered bodies together in ways that were countercultural and non-normative, even against the law in many states (the police were called frequently to monitor the Azusa revival due to its racial and gender counter-cultural practices). Azusa invites us to ask how the body brings us into being and voice as moral and political agents struggling against precarity and systemic evil, to use Judith Butler's words here. It is through their viscerally haptic forms of religious agency that Azusa participants remake their social and political worlds. They gather and this diverse assembly should be understood as a political “speech act” that confronts and talks back to the segregated political institutions of society.

Another implication of my argument is to be attentive to the fragile, contingent nature of our modern political institutions, which means listening to religious perspectives that imagine political futures in alternate ways. Azusa imagined different

political futures outside of America's white racial order. Azusa fashioned a "politics of re-existence" that allowed its members to refuse how the state marked them as a non-citizen, as people without proper political and social consciousness and agency to shape futures. I draw upon postcolonial scholar Adolfo Alban's notion of re-existence as "the mechanisms that human groups implement as a strategy of questioning and making visible the practices of racialization, exclusion and marginalization, procuring the redefining and re-signifying of life in conditions of dignity and self-determination, while at the same time confronting the bio-politic that controls, dominates and commodifies subjects and nature."^{xii} Notice that Alban deploys a Foucauldian idea of politics, being the quest to participate in practices of freedom that allow the subject to challenge the disciplinary power associated with the bio-political order in efforts to re-imagine the conditions under which all people's dignity and worth can exist. As Foucault reminds us, disciplinary power is not merely coercive but productive, as it normalizes the terms under which we exist as moral agents. Modern disciplinary power simply does not physically punish; instead, it renders certain moral behaviors and activities as inherent to nature and innate to what it means to be human, so that individual agents regulate their own actions in accord with normative terms of social and political existence. Consequently, individuals are controlled by terms they believe to be their own.

Through attempting to exist religiously in countercultural ways against the American biopolitic, many Azusa members exposed and refused the normative terms of America's antiblack order. Perhaps Azusa helps religious communities ask what alternate political futures and alternate exercises of freedom against an antiblack order are possible in a time of growing American fascism that has legitimated white supremacist populism, criminalized abortion, struck down affirmative action and diversity initiatives, ended early childhood educational programs, allowed militarized acting police to engage socially conscious college students on campuses with gross violence, and more.

While I haven't exhausted implications of Azusa's alternate practices of freedom, one is hopefully able to see what different questions can be foregrounded in light of my argument. Most importantly, it begins to expand the kinds of questions and discussions we engage surrounding the means and ends of black freedom. I do think that religious studies must position itself to provide more complex readings of black freedom (and freedom more generally) and how this shapes our contemporary times.

Religion, Material Culture, and Museums

The importance of material culture to religion is now widely acknowledged, even accepted. Over the past decade, especially after recent philanthropic investment in the area, museum directors and curators have grappled with how to present faith and practice for a diverse public. This interactive forum session seeks to address how different religions are portrayed, and the nature of religious objects when they are also artifacts—or seemingly mundane objects that were religious for a different culture. How does a material object convey a culture's values, both past and present? What ethical issues are at play in this unique educational setting?

Sally M. Promey

Yale University

I approach the subject of religion, materiality, and museums as someone in the planning stages of a substantial collaborative exhibition on religion in modern and contemporary art in the United States, an exhibition that also aims to directly engage some of the concerns I raise and to do so in conversation with an interdisciplinary curatorial constellation of partners. I'm especially interested in thinking about curation as an opportunity to teach and learn together, to rigorously, collegially, test one another's assumptions. Since much of what I have to say here is cautionary, I want also to be clear that I imagine a present and future for museums as agents of social good and social change, as partners in a project of public education.

The prompt for this panel identifies museum spaces as "unique educational settings." But museums are equally promotional spaces, capitalist spaces, and it seems necessary to place museums within a historical context that situates them as exhibitionary enterprises, alongside other "modern" venues of display---and also to think about the many and various organizations that frame themselves as museums or aim to include "museuming" among their other projects and labors. What is the work of museum display?

While there are at least as many answers to this question as there are museums, historically modern display is categorically quite specific. Like religion and in some degree of correlation with it, display took shape in its current Western forms as a mode of presentation closely aligned with colonizing imperial exploits and the justifications they necessitated, including the engines of "civilization" and secularization---and the valorizations of Whiteness presumed to secure this pairing. This display phenomenon ramped up in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, coincident in the United States with the project of nationhood. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett discusses display in this regard, elaborating "the museum effect" as an imperial strategy of distinction, and a tactic of national heritage production.¹ (Perhaps it goes without saying that we currently inhabit another moment of ramped up national display, of marking distinctions and inventing heritage.)

To attend for a moment to the history: Writing on the emergence of the museum as an institution, Tony Bennett numbers it among sibling manifestations of an enduring Western "exhibitionary complex" taking shape around the same time as US nation formation, and over the course of the nineteenth century.² The museum's concurrent familial relations in this regard included the department store, the international exposition, the art gallery, the missionary exhibition, and a host of venues united in their commitments to new forms of display. The medium of photography grew up in tandem with this complex, as one of its prime evidentiary media of expression, and photography well served display's possessive racializing aims. Imperial

acquisition, capitalist excess, and Christian missions and evangelism each required venues to showcase their trophies and treasures, to show them in such a way as to communicate the West's ideological obsessions with its developmental supersessionist trajectories of humanity and civilization. This imperial disposition became a manner of constructing the self, positioning the self vis-à-vis others, teaching a citizenry a manner of self-presentation to the world: "nationing" a people, to use a verbal expression introduced by Bennett.

Invested with visibility, materiality, and spatiality, display adopts an identifiable set of postures in relation to those it addresses. Display not only "shows," it also "tells"; it materializes as a calculation for communicating cultural values and eliciting valued behaviors.³ One of the things we do in museums is to make a thing *real*, to set it into a space of focused concentration, to assign it value of various sorts, with expectations about the "take-away." The material and the sensory *provide evidence*. What are we providing evidence of/for? What is the story we want to tell? How can we, over time, tell multiple stories, messier stories? Within this system of "show and tell," and within each sort of "museum," especially as concerns American religion, what do we show---or not show? What do we tell---or not tell? To what and whom do we deny this kind of "reality"? ...and importantly: how and why do we make these decisions?

Objects not only convey values and provide material evidence for them, but objects help to make these values *familiar*: Recent Supreme Court cases concerning material and performative religion have turned on ideas of "history and tradition," of "heritage," and of "familiarity."⁴ What does privileging the "familiar" produce in a country that has already (and over centuries) carefully curated its "familiar" (its habits, its heritage) to look White and Christian and capitalist? (The NYT just this morning [on 14 June 2024], in coverage on a current trademark case, reported Justice Sonia Sotomayor's comments on the Court's resort to the test of "history and tradition": "It's like entering a crowded cocktail party," she said, "and looking over everyone's heads to find your friends---and it's even worse when you are finding your friends in a crowded party to which you've not been invited.")

Returning to the idea of museums as educational spaces: Social transaction and exchange happen around objects in spaces. The public display of religion is a form of American sociality partnered with and within space. Space is a critical substance of display; it is a requisite constituent. Space shapes display, makes and coordinates its climates. I am interested in individual display but also in understanding the ways spatial design organizes and allocates power and creates presumptions of legitimacy, how such organization and allocation invite differential protections and services that undergird bias and

privilege, investing them with authority in the articulation and

representation of culture. Where does the museum allow the “unfamiliar” to *land*. This is partly about the politics of spatial location: Where is a display placed, what is it near, who is likely to encounter it? From whence can it be seen? How does a display’s location (in a particular space in a museum, or in a particular kind of museum) contribute to ambient information about what qualifies as American religion, about how American religion materializes?⁵

Display is not always, or even often, a “privilege” or “courtesy” that religious objects seek. Museums have been around long enough that some religious objects are made for them--but this is not most often the case. When we display, we ask objects and the cultures that made them to perform for us. Whatever else display does, it very often (and I’m backing away only slightly here from saying “always”) instrumentalizes objects of one culture for purposes of another. What are the limits (and limitations) of display, especially in contexts where a version of concealment might be the more suitable cultural alternative? When are we and when are we not in a position to see the edges and implications of the thing we do when we display?

Finally: Museum display, in past and present, has usually been predicated on categories that set up hierarchies and align poorly with the lived experience of religious artifacts and of artifacts that carry religious valence. The very terms “religion”; “art”; and “artifact” already set into play this thicket of inadequate terminologies and boxes. Museums of Fine Art (especially those that exhibit modern and contemporary American and European Fine Arts) have been the toughest nut to crack for religion; I am, for this reason, especially interested in these places. Historically (and recently too) art museums have seemed most comfortable *either* with religion they can place securely in the premodern past or somehow otherwise frame as “primitivize” *or* with objects they can spiritualize into abstraction (as a “safer” alternative to other possibilities for configuring “religious” arts in modernity).⁶

I could offer many and diverse examples. Just one must suffice here: Yale art history PhD student Colton Klein has researched the exhibition history of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Klein’s work demonstrates that between 1931 and 2021 a mere .2% of the Whitney’s exhibitions over the full course of these decades concerned religion---and of these four exhibitions, three presented Shaker “folk” arts. These displays thus curated objects whose “religion” could be securely cordoned off as “folk-ish” and “primitive”: *American* but ancestrally so, “heritage” that richly rewarded its collectors’ salvaging efforts and secured an American genealogy (of some “antiquity”) for modernist abstraction. Each one of these three Whitney exhibitions, furthermore, foregrounded aesthetics, in the process elevating this dimension above the array of other religious practices in relation to which these “arts” might be most accurately located. (The fourth exhibition among this set, a small assembly of roughly contemporary art works, was not organized by Whitney curators.)

Marci Reaven

Curator of Acts of Faith Exhibit

Our many thanks to the conference organizers and to the Eiteljorg. We were thrilled that *Acts of Faith* was included in the conference program.

Since some of you have now seen the exhibit, I'd like to take a moment to give a bit of background. By uncovering the connections between religion and 19th-century western expansion, *Acts of Faith* illuminates the early roots of our religious diversity and the impact of religion on American life during critical years of nation-building. The exhibit opened at New York Historical Society last fall, and after it closes at the Eiteljorg Museum will go to the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin. In addition, we've been preparing a full virtual tour of the exhibit, which should be completed this year. I was the lead curator, and until a few months ago, was New-York Historical's Vice President of History Exhibitions.

New York Historical is an art and history museum and a research library, founded in 1804. It sees itself as a place devoted to sharing US history, so the exhibits don't have to focus on New York, but there is usually an attempt to bring in local stories and themes.

The museum's president became intrigued with the idea of doing a show about the Western United States because, as a scholar of Medieval Spain, she has long been surprised that Americans know so little about the historical presence of the Spanish empire on these lands.

In my subsequent search for an angle on the subject, I hit upon the idea of exploring the interplay between western expansion and religion during the 19th century. We pursued that idea for a few reasons:

- First, it seemed like an under-explored and surprising angle, especially for a secular institution located on the East Coast. And I have to say that the scholars we contacted were quite enthusiastic about the idea and urged us to go ahead.
- Second, we could legitimately highlight the critical roles that New York City and State played in this story about the shaping of our nation.
- And third, the history had compelling things to say about how religion had influenced ideas about identity, belonging, and democracy – all themes that NY Historical treats in its exhibitions and programs. We also thought it would be helpful, in our current political moment, for visitors to consider how religiously heterogeneous we've been and how often this diversity has given rise to campaigns for homogeneity.

Throughout our research and curatorial process, we worked

with many different scholars and tradition bearers. The exhibit that emerged is primarily driven by its historical narrative, but the material culture we employed — represented in the objects and images on display — is central to the storytelling. I'd like to give some examples in response to a few of the discussion questions.

1) *How are different religions portrayed?*

One thing that the objects helped us do was anchor our portrayal of different religious groups.

We decided to organize our displays around stories that mostly focused on particular groups of people and their religious or spiritual beliefs. We wanted the stories to move our narrative forward but also be specific to a people, a time, and a place. We hoped this approach would help us avoid large generalizations that would flatten out diversities and complexities within religions, or misrepresent the role of religion in western expansion during our time periods. So the material culture helped us *literally* construct and present these stories.

One prime example was a *bulto*, or 3-dimensional representation of San Ysidro—patron saint of farmers—created by a santero named José Benito Ortega and borrowed from the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe. We displayed it alongside a mural we created of a San Ysidro procession that depicted this bulto being carried through New Mexican fields. This striking object anchored our story about the long presence of the Spanish empire in this region, *and* the residents' continued commitment to Catholicism under the Mexican Republic. But it also helped us portray their embodied Catholic faith, their focus on the land, and the important role that lay religious leaders played. This *particular* bulto also interested us because the saint wears boots evoking the moccasins worn by local Pueblo peoples, some of whom would have participated in the processions with the Hispano villagers.

Religious objects and images also helped us try to convey an insider perspective when we talked about the experiences of different religious groups and attempted to give voice to religiosity. In one example, we used the panoramic murals of a Danish convert to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to discuss the group's exodus to Utah. The artist, CCA Christensen, used his murals in much the same way as he traveled the Mountain West in the latter 19th century, delivering lectures about the Church and its history. In another instance, we displayed several black ash baskets from the contemporary Potawatomi basket maker Jamie Chapman, who spoke about the connections between her basketmaking, culture, and beliefs in an interview for our audio tour.

Christensen's murals appear in the exhibit as reproductions, but the baskets are originals, commissioned for the exhibit.

I've never been reluctant to display reproductions of artifacts, but sometimes originals seem particularly warranted. For example, we decided to primarily show originals in the display that focuses on Haudenosaunee and Potawatomi history at the opening of the exhibit. We saw this as a way to give special weight to stories that are so little known outside those communities, and to demonstrate cultural continuity.

2) What ethical issues are at play in this unique educational setting?

Moving to another of the discussion questions, we attempted to stay alert to ethical issues at play in our choices about presentation and representation. The principal way this factored into our work was in trying to be respectful of the objects and the attachments or sensitivities that visitors might bring with them.

We knew, for example, that the religious objects would be disconnected from their sacred settings, but we sought to display and describe them accurately, and, when possible, give them enough physical context so they would speak to those visitors who would find special meaning in them.

And there were times when we chose not to include a story or an object because there didn't seem to be a way to do so without treading on protected practices.

We worked intensively with our advisers on these sorts of issues. During installation, I was really pleased to hear the response of museum staff working in a variety of positions across the institution. A number of them told me how surprised and gratified they were to see the religious objects and displays. Religion had never before been a topic of any of our conversations, so it was eye-opening for me.

3) How does a material object convey a culture's values, both past and present?

Lastly, one of the discussion questions asks: How does an object convey a culture's values?

One extraordinary example of this in *Acts of Faith* is the rare bone repatriation book created by a Chinese American benevolent society that documented the deeply spiritual practice of bone repatriation and the extraordinary efforts in the 19th century that were mounted to find, exhume, and send home to China the bones of deceased workers. This rare book is one of the main reasons that the practice of bone repatriation in the US has been kept in historical and cultural memory, for which we can thank the scholars and activists who rediscovered it and the China Alley Preservation Society in California for preserving it.

Lois Silverman

Indiana University, Indianapolis

As an interdisciplinary museum studies scholar-practitioner, I believe our panel's key question is *How can museums present faith and practice ethically and effectively for a diverse public?* My answer is deceptively simple: museums must foster transcendence. Not only is transcendence the most urgent need of our times, but it is also the core purpose of museums. And the *Acts of Faith: Religion and the American West* exhibit provides evidence of, and guidance for, this work.

The American Alliance of Museums' Code of Ethics for Museums states that museums collect "natural objects...and all manner of human artifacts to advance knowledge and nourish the human spirit."¹ For years, I've pondered this, and sought a concise way to describe the intersections of objects, knowledge, and spirit. That led me to *transcendence*.

In popular use, transcendence means "going beyond." Yet across disciplines, there are at least three compelling kinds of transcendence. First, *self-transcendence* refers to the innate drive of individuals to learn and grow. As Joseph Chilton Pearce described, transcendence is both a biological fact and a human need.² Second, *collective transcendence* concerns the ways that groups foster change. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt noted this can involve a good feeling of losing your sense of separateness and becoming part of something larger.³ And third, *material transcendence* encompasses how people engage the unseen, including faith and spiritual practice. As anthropologist Jack Hunter contends, humans throughout history have "described encounters with phenomena that seem to transcend the everyday world of mundane things...the supernatural."⁴

While these kinds of transcendence may seem like lofty goals for museums, all three can happen for visitors. By definition, museums are unique educational settings that offer encounters with objects and people. And, they have long been viewed as places for "experience with something higher, more sacred, and out-of-the-ordinary."⁵ Museums are ethically bound to uphold a "commitment of service to the public" and be "responsive to the concerns, interests and needs of society."⁶ Given the staggering injustices, divides, and violence around us, it is incumbent on museums to foster transcendence.

Can museums really reach these heights, and if so, how? I've written elsewhere about fieldwide examples⁷, but I'd like to turn to *Acts of Faith* for some evidence and insight. I use qualitative methods to study people's museum experiences, because we can't know how to present *any* subject through museums without visitor engagement. So, let's consider some of the most sacred words in the entire exhibit, those in the comment books at the "What Are Your Thoughts?" Station. Here the sign reads, "We invite you to consider these questions, or any others inspired by the exhibit." I searched the books for

common themes, treating sixty total comments as data. Five distinct types of comments emerged.

First, **some visitors wrote statements of their own personal beliefs.** For example, "My belief in Christ supersedes any debate of religious differences. God knows me, you, everyone. This knowledge will give me strength to be different, unique, and qualify me for Eternal Life and Exaltation with my family and savior. Love, M." Wrote another, "Hey. Hellenic Polytheist here. Personally, I think Religion is fine, but it shouldn't influence Politics. SEPARATION OF CHURCH & STATE. – Mutt (he/she)." These kinds of comments show that the exhibit fostered individual self-reflection, and the comment books offered a way for people to contribute.

Second, **many wrote that the exhibit was educational, and some noted exactly what they learned.** For example, "Exhibition is gorgeous...interesting...and informative. I learned about Latter-Day Saints' persecution and about Santa Lucia." Wrote another, "I didn't realize the 13th Amendment abolished slavery except as consequence for crime...sounds like a sneaky way to keep slavery allowable." Some felt the exhibit filled gaps in their formal education. For example, "Much of the history of Native Americans as I've learned it in school growing up in Indiana was fairly broad and glossed over many religious aspects of the culture. It was interesting to learn more." Wrote another, "I was never exposed to more than stereotypes of North American Natives. I'm glad to be learning more as an octogenarian elder." These comments show that visitors learned, and those "rarely told, object-based stories" in the exhibit seemed memorable and effective.

Third, **some comments described how the exhibit fostered empathy.** For example, "I thought it was a moving exhibit and really helps people understand what others had to go through. Wrote another, "The attention to detail that gives the setting really allows one to be able to step into these people's shoes and see what life and transitioning into new life was like." As "Nathan" wrote: "Doesn't art with reading take you somewhere where you are not, like you are the character in their perspective or point of view?" It's likely that presenting multiple perspectives and common experiences, like challenge and change, were effective exhibit strategies.

Fourth, **many people wrote comments comparing the past to the present, often expressing concern, fear, or resignation.** For example, "This exhibit proves human history and future is an ongoing story of conquest and domination. Differences over time are tools used and who is in power." Wrote another, "It seems we have failed to learn from the past, therefore likely to repeat it. As Rodney King asked, 'can't we all just get along?'" Wrote another, "I hope we don't move backwards in religious and constitutional freedom." And another: "Colonization is still

happening!”

Yet fifth, **many people implied a commitment to religious diversity and tolerance.** For example, “Religion is important whether you believe in it or not...Everyone is allowed to believe what they want to believe. That doesn’t make them any less human than you and it shouldn’t be a reason for hatred and intolerance.” Wrote another, “May we see a more tolerant and understanding America in this lifetime. Oppression has no place here and it’s time we actually learned from our history.” Or, in the words of one young visitor, “I wish that everyone is nice.”

While a deeper dive with visitors through in-depth interviews and focus groups would provide much further insight, these five themes suggest that *Acts of Faith* at the Eiteljorg Museum in Indianapolis fostered transcendence for visitors, through self-reflection, learning, empathy for others, critical thinking, and commitment to diversity and tolerance. And, although it didn’t appear as a theme, I suspect that some visitors also had spiritual or supernatural experiences, which happens in museums more than you might think. In conclusion, as the words of visitors indicate, there *are* effective strategies for presenting faith and practice for a diverse public. And fostering transcendence is the heart and soul of the matter and the ultimate purpose of museums.

Latinx Religious Diversity

In many of our syllabi, Latinx religion is solely discussed in terms of Catholicism and Pentecostalism. What are we missing with this oversimplification? What are the variations within those categories, as well as altogether different faiths? How does the Latinx experience in North American shape the diversity of these faiths, and vice versa?

João Chaves

Baylor University

For time's sake, I will assume things I would otherwise be tempted to explain more extensively. First, I will assume Brazilians are or can be Latinx, which, although not necessarily an uncontroversial topic, adds to the deep complexity amongst Latinx people.ⁱ Secondly, I will assume the fluidity of borders and the identities of peoples who cross and are crossed by them. Although I do recognize that Latino Studies and Latin American Studies are disciplines that are not always in conversation with each other, Latina and Latin American lives and religious imaginations are often intertwined. The continuing advancement of communication and travel technologies further solidifies the ability of Latinxs and Latin Americans to live transnational lives—the worldwide crisscrossing of religious stuff is part of this dynamic.

With these in mind, I'll begin with a practice prominent among Latino Pentecostals: a *testimonio*. I grew up in a household that was not necessarily exceptional in my region of Brazil. My father was a *Cafuzo* man (native Brazilian and Black) and practiced Afro-Brazilian spiritualities; my mother was a White agnostic. My grandmother on my mother's side, who lived with us, was an committed Pentecostal, but most of my family were Roman Catholic, even if not necessarily singularly affiliated with Roman Catholicism. The clash of plausibility structures—or their creative exchange—was a daily activity.

I mention this to highlight that the interactions among different religious and non-religious imaginations and cosmologies in Latin American and Latino households are common and open spaces for cross-pollination. Such exchanges between religious imaginations affect how people translate different forms of Christianity into local idioms, and, in turn, these translations of Christianity make it into the North American religious markets through various means—while they continue to adapt. When we pay attention to these dynamics, the fact that Catholicism remains a dominant influence among Latinos, with Pentecostalism also representing a significant force, should be accompanied by an awareness that such dispositions are highly diversified. This diversification is informed by the continuing re-claiming of ancestral traditions and the introduction of innovations that shape Christian forms and meanings. One could mention, for example, the Mayan Christian integration of *Popol Vuh* in their scriptural hermeneutics, different forms of *curanderismo* practiced by Christians, and the creative exchanges between Afro-diasporic spiritualities and Christian practice. Latino Mormons also continue to become more visible in Latin America and the U.S.ⁱⁱ There are an estimated 500,000 Latino Mormons in the U.S., and 8 out of the top 10 countries with the highest number of Mormons are in Latin America. If one combines Latino and Latin American Mormons, they make up the largest group within Mormonism.ⁱⁱⁱ What would it mean to imagine Mormonism as a Brown religion? The only country in the top 10 that was not in the Américas was the Philippines—

and although I will not try to navigate Filipino-Hispanic heritages, there is an increasing number of Americans who self-identify as both Asian-American and Latino.^{iv} The mixing and multiple affiliation possibilities of the complexification of pan-ethnic identities, of course, go beyond any particular religion.

The means by which new constellations of Latin American and Latinx-inspired spiritualities arrive in North America include Latin American migrants, colonized peoples, and their descendants, but U.S.-born populations of various backgrounds also encounter such dispositions in different places and are influenced by them, often broadening how Latinx religions advance. In other words, the diaspora of peoples and their gods do not have their influences entirely circumscribed by ethnolinguistic boundaries. Consider the movie industry's attempts to capitalize on different forms of indigenous spiritualities in Christianized settings, such as in the movies *Encanto* (more popular in France than in Colombia), *Coco* (more popular in China than in Mexico), or the *Book of Life* (popular in Russia). One could also mention the infamous Brazilian John of God, who had his combination of Catholicism, Spiritism, and faith healing praised by prominent U.S. celebrities who visited him in his Ignatius of Loyola house in Brazil. Perhaps his most influential former supporter was Oprah Winfrey, who interviewed and wrote about him—calling him “inspiring.” Bill Clinton, Naomi Campbell, Shirley MacLaine, and others add to the list of those who visited the now-convicted rapist.^v

Of course, other religions navigate the Américas fluidly. For example, the first significant group of Jewish settlers in New York arrived in 1654, coming from my hometown, Recife, where the first synagogue of the Américas was established in 1637. This example reminds us of the deep history of other religions arriving from Latin America to the U.S., which continues today. If you want to have some self-improvement religious fun in Austin, Texas, you can schedule an Ayahuasca ceremony for a small fee—or go to retreats in Colorado, Florida, Georgia, or Washington State; just call you Aya Advisor today! The appeal of Black Atlantic religions in the U.S. could also be mentioned, and you can look for the American Association of Brazilian Candomblé and Culture that tries to connect sister traditions, including Lucumí, Santería, Ocha, and Palo and that often nurture, to invoke Rachel Harding's language, “Alternative Spaces of Blackness.”^{vi}

Islam also has deep roots in Latin America, partially because up to 20% of enslaved Africans who arrived in Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico were Muslim, and Arab Muslims migrated to several countries. The networks between Muslims in the Américas, dating back to the 19th century, are significant to this history.^{vii} Today, there are approximately 300,000 Latinx Muslims in the U.S., most of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent; more than half of them converted from Catholicism and several married

Arab or African Muslims.^{viii} New configurations of Afro-Latinidad are brewing.

A growing edge of Latinos, however, identify as religious “nones”—approximately 30% of them, which also deserves consideration^{ix}

So, regarding Latinx Religious diversity, we would do well to consider at least three major themes: (1) Latinx Catholicism and Pentecostalism, as highly translatable dispositions, take on several different forms among Latinx people; (2) despite the outsized influence of Catholicism and Pentecostalism, Latinx religions are varied, and their influence can be seen beyond their primary roles in Latinx communities; and (3) the transnational cross-pollination of Latinx religions, through migration, intermarriage, communication technologies, and otherwise, continues to shape people across borders and cultures. You do not have to go far to experience examples of how these streams converge and shape U.S. culture. Just google “Day of the Dead” and the name of your university and join the party. You will be warmly welcomed!

Gerardo Martí

Davidson College

“By Any Other Name”

I'd like to tell you something about myself. I've often been asked if I am related to the great Cuban poet and apostle of justice, José Martí. The answer—yes. Although I have not been able to precisely trace him, he is a great uncle, a few generations removed. It's my last name, Martí [*mahr-tee*] or properly pronounced Martí [*mañt-TEE*] that tips off informed people.

My name is Gerardo Martí [*jer-RAHR-doe mahr-tee*], although my name is really Gerardo Martí [*heř-ařdo mañt-TEE*], and known among my family and friends growing up as Gerardito [*heř-ař-DEE-toe*], which means “little Gerardo” since I was named after my father, known as Gerardo [*heř-ařdo*] among Spanish speakers, but just Ralph at his workplace—which itself is short for Rafael [*řah-fah-EL*], his official first name but which no one ever called him. That meant that among Cuban refugees, my name had to be distinguished from my father's, but in English, there was no problem. No one called my father Gerardo [*jer-RAHR-doe*], and no Cubans ever called me that either because it's wrong and sounds weird. Still, I've gone by Gerardo [*jer-RAHR-doe*] since I was 5 years old for the simple reason that my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Wolfe, told me, my parents, and the whole school in an authoritative voice, “His name is Gerardo [*jer-RAHR-doe*].”

As refugees from coming to the U.S. shortly after Castro's Revolution, my parents met and married in Massachusetts, just outside of Boston. I joke that I'm glad I did not grow up in the Boston area, otherwise my name would have been *Je-RAH-doe MAH-tee* [*heavy Boston accent*]. Like many Latine people, I'm a product of historical circumstances that pushed people from their native countries to the United States, yet my parents were part of truly exceptional circumstances in the American fight against Soviet Communism that pulled Cubans like them directly into the U.S. after President John F. Kennedy using his executive powers to institute the Cuban Refugee Program in 1962.¹ Although they both landed in Massachusetts, it's cold there—it has, like, *snow*—so when Cuban friends moved to the West coast and told my parents “there are plenty of jobs” and “it's warm here,” moving to Southern California was a no-brainer. I grew up living minutes from Disneyland and, at the same time, minutes from hundreds of Cuban refugees. (I was one of the few among them who was an American citizen by birth.)

Living in a rapidly suburbanizing Orange County resulted in a dual cultural existence. As noted by historians like Darren Dochuk² and my own writings with Mark Mulder on the development of megachurch pastor Robert H. Schuller's *Hour of Power* and Crystal Cathedral ministries,³ the dominant migration in the area consisted of white, church-going Southerners and Midwesterners who quickly gained property wealth and successfully segregated the majority of the existing Latin American population to a few square miles in Santa Ana—the only non-white majority city in the county.⁴ The dominant expression of what it meant to be Hispanic or Latine was to be *Mexican*, and my parents (and every other Cuban I knew) spent a lot of effort making sure they were not ever confused with being Mexican. My first language

is Spanish, but I knew few other Latines outside my Cuban enclave, and there were relatively few in my white dominant public schools. Despite my name, my lighter skin and lack of accent led most people to somehow think I was *Italian*. With my first name, other kids would sometimes tease me with a mock-Italian pronunciation—*Je-RAR-doe*—and my last time often slipped into a joking accentuation of *Martini*. “Hey, Martini!” Of course, most of you know that by the 1970s and 80s, Italians were thought of as being “white,”⁵ helping further distinguish me from darker and distinctively accented Mexicans at my school.

Had I grown up in the Boston area instead of Southern California, my circumstances would have been quite different. Lawrence, Massachusetts, where my parents and I lived, is a light industrial area that became New England's first Latino-majority city. Historian Llana Barber described how U.S. intervention in Latin America had driven poor and working-class Latinos from places like Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic to Lawrence where they struggled with segregation and joblessness.⁶ Economic opportunities shrunk in Lawrence. In contrast, they continued to grow in Orange County. It seemed that the Cubans in Orange County were largely unburdened by long standing stigmas of the Mexican and Chicano populations that had suffered discrimination and racialized suspicions. Cubans were largely accepted as white, and their anticommunist stance fit into the pervasive anticommunism and general political conservatism of the region. While I grew up immersed in a Cuban enclave, it was intermittent in any particular week. My Cuban community occupied my weekends and special occasions, but those intense days left most of the week embedded among white Southerners and Midwesterners from school and, soon, from church.

Religion, Religiosity, Religious Opportunity

The religious influence of Orange County served as a key biographical influence. Garden Grove, the city of my residence, has long time been recognized as one of the California cities with the most churches per capita.⁷ Walking a few minutes in any direction took me to a variety of Baptist, Catholic, Church of Christ, Lutheran, Methodist, non-denominational Christian, Pentecostal fellowships, and a variety of house-based meetings. Significantly, I was living in the midst of an Charismatic-evangelical hotbed that provided me multiple opportunities for immersion in white evangelical fellowships. As part of my Cuban upbringing, I was raised Roman Catholic—and would have likely remained Catholic in Lawrence, Massachusetts—but with the supply side dynamics of white dispensational and fundamentalist-tinged Christianity in Southern California, by middle school I experienced a radical conversion at a local white church, filled with people from Texas, Tennessee, and Oklahoma, which eventually introduced me to Pepperdine University, led by Church of Christ affiliated conservatives.

My evangelical connections gave me repeated opportunities to participate in many youth-oriented events targeting white

evangelical youths—Christian concerts, other free social events, overnight camps—which led to my dating white evangelical women and marrying one originally from Akron, Ohio. By this time, my Cuban connections were like distant cousins. I had left the Cuban enclave to socially immerse myself almost totally among white evangelicals, although my proficiency in Spanish allowed me great opportunities to spend time in Spain and Mexico, and immersive work in East Los Angeles. Yet in every Latin American context I entered, I was rarely seen as Cuban, at least not “fully” Cuban. In fact, anytime I am introduced to another Cuban, their excitement quickly wore off. I wasn’t born in Cuba, my Cuban-inflected dialect was poor, my grasp of recent history or pop culture non-existent. Inevitably they say to me in a disappointed tone, “You’re not really Cuban, are you,” and slip out of conversation.

The religion of Cubans in Orange County that had not yet converted to evangelicalism (many of them shifted just as I had) was seeped in Santeria-inflected Catholicism, the kind plainly visible on my visit to Cuba in 2017 and 2018. My grandmother had statues of the sword-wielding Santa Barbara and crutch-bearing San Lazaro familiar to any Cuban. She wore an evil-eye amulet and had more respect for the spirits than for any ordained priest. I’ve had other experiences with Cuba-saturated religion, but time does not permit to share how the Cuban community worked with charms, curses, vows, worship of saints, and various ceremonies, sometimes subtle (like money placed under statues in Cuban restaurants) and sometimes grand (dedications to major saints in wealthy persons’s homes).

Circumstances, Diversities, Migrations

Indulging in some biographical reflection is intended to suggest a variety of dynamics I find especially relevant in considering Latine religious diversity today. For example, I have intimate experience with aspects of Latine Protestantism. Once I recognized the larger shifts occurring in recent decades, I partnered with colleagues to write on the diversity among Latino Protestants, which are interesting and varied in their manifestations and complexities.⁸ I always feel like not enough has been said on the importance of Latine Protestantism, essentially because there is a need for scholarship to make legible the surprisingly broad patterns and general trends taking shape.⁹ The case of Latine Protestantism is relevant for highlighting a much larger question: How might Latine groups of people be distinguished, and how can they be classified and, in a sense, “explained”? There is a richness to the study of particular ethnic and racial patterns that can be difficult to capture, especially with factors of migration and time are each added. Which should be made more visible? How do we assess their scholarly significance?

So, while I engaged a biographical exercise for this discussion, what might this generate as fodder for our conversation?

- First – as a social scientist, I face a constant temptation to essentialize racial and ethnic groups and experiences, and it’s easy to understand why—because it simplifies our world, making it easier to categorize and quantify for purposes of comparison. My own exercise in describing the growing

conservative politicization of Latino Protestants not only creates a convenient binary between “Catholic” and “Protestant,” but also often sidesteps considerations of fragments, overlaps, splits within each group (for example, Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Mainline only gets us started among Protestants). Fluidity of group connections and fluidity in the nature of the self allow for serendipity that can be difficult to capture or require time to properly isolate. I am not blind to these finer grains, yet pragmatics of analytical and conceptual utility tend to pervade. How can simplifications be best approached in our teaching and scholarship?

- The 1965 U.S. Immigration Act and global disruptions among Latin American countries resulted in unexpected increases in immigrants from below the Southern border and resulted in far more complicated narratives of religious origins, movements, and developments. Mexico is already much more complicated than most people acknowledge, particularly with indigenous populations. Missionary activities from various quarters also add diversity. How do we consider the global migration context in productive ways?
- Who lives among who becomes crucial for their religious communities and practices. Subsets of ethnic connections can shift in unexpected ways. We know movement and migration change these groups. Moreover, some Latine groups are consonant enough with each other to forge unity, but others less so, making for a different potential of highly particularistic Latine religious expressions. What kind of diversity is significant? When do we defer to greater complexity?
- Language is not uniform among all Latin Americans (as any colleagues who study Latin America and its diaspora will surely emphasize for us), and it goes beyond the colonial languages of Spanish and Portuguese to hundreds of living indigenous languages. Catholic and Protestant groups have rooted themselves among indigenous groups, but there exist practices of Santeria (Cuba) and Candomblé (Brazil) and lesser-known Andean and Mesoamerican religions. We can recognize diversity. The question at some point becomes: How much sophistication can any of us sustain?
- Ultimately, the question of significance haunts our choices: Why do Latine people matter with respect to religion and how so? Our scholarship veers toward respect gained by perceived relevance, which is why my most recent focus on Latine Protestants seeks to reveal how they fall into conservative political patterns and are increasingly aligning themselves with white evangelicalism.¹⁰ Statistically speaking, support for Donald Trump is significantly more likely among

Latino Protestants than Catholics, greater frequency of church growing is also associated with support not only for voting for Trump but also disagreeing with his impeachment, and the growing percentage of these Republican leaning Protestants is thwarting any vestige of hope for a long-expected “blue wave” of Democratic support. In short, the diffuseness of the Latino Protestant vote will likely contribute to Trump wins in the coming election beyond Florida and Texas. If I’m right, we will hear much more about Latino Protestants, but the discussion will be subsumed largely under the broader label of white evangelical religion, prompting the issue of whether we are really paying attention to a distinct *Latinidad* in religion or not.

In the end, some people, some groups, some communities lend themselves to a cleaner narrative. Most may not. Rather than the convenience of Catholic / Protestant / Jew / Indigenous / Other, we may require new frameworks for accommodating changing dynamics that do not rest on such neat categorizations. And any analytical decisions will likely face resistance from Latine groups that have been stigmatized or neglected. Perhaps most importantly, we must avoid the exoticization of Latine religious diversity, highlighting only non-U.S. “foreign” aspects of Latine religion as most properly “Latine.” As scholars of American religion, I encourage us to speak of Latine religious diversity as an aspect of “American” religion—made, melded, mixed, mutated—in the U.S., not just part of the broader sweep of the Americas that is somehow most authentic when it is most “other.”

Daisy Vargas

University of Arizona

In true academic form, I want to begin with a definition of terms and my own questions.

What do we mean by “Latinx”? Who is Latinx? How does this shape ideas about Latinx religion?

What are we missing with this oversimplification?

Firstly, the oversimplification of Latinx religion as Catholicism and/or Pentecostalism, begins with the term “Latinx.” It is a term meant to encompass the 33 different nationalities and 448 languages of Latin America and “some” of the Caribbean, and collapses and erases the racial, linguistic, and cultural diversity of these communities into a pan-ethnicity. As Marta Caminero-Santangelo argues, “to the extent that ‘Latinidad’ exists, it is largely a product of being in the U.S. and of commonalities forged within that context.”¹

Therefore, I hold in tension the following: In the United States, Latinidad (as it is constructed, wielded, and enforced) is a project of white supremacy that largely excludes Black Latinxs and Indigenous Latinxs through the discourses of mestizaje.² But also, that Latinidad is racialized; despite its proximity to whiteness, it is perpetually foreign and non-white in the U.S.

Secondly, the seeming overrepresentation of Latinx religion as Catholicism and Pentecostalism can be explained in four ways:

1. Embedded in the construct of the categories of Latinx and Latinidad are the ideological and imperial projects of Catholicism, Spanish colonialism, and U.S. intervention.

2. The history of our field has been shaped by scholars of these religious traditions and with ties to those communities

3. Christianity (as a majority religion in the United States) may have served to legitimize Latinx Religion within the broader field of Religious Studies

4. Demographic data until recently has affirmed these two traditions as the most prevalent among individuals who identify as Hispanic and/or Latinx

Thirdly, Latinx religiosity in the United States is racialized. Over a decade since Senate Bill 1070 “the Show me your papers law” was enacted in the State of Arizona, the state of Texas passed Senate Bill 4 last November, granting local police officers the capacity to serve as immigration enforcement in order to identify, arrest, and detain suspected undocumented migrants and charge them with “illegal entry.”

My research on material religion in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands reveals that law enforcement officials are trained to identify Catholic material religion as markers of potential criminality and illegality. During formal traffic stops and more “informal

mechanisms of law enforcement” like checkpoints, law enforcement in the U.S. testify to being able to identify Latinxs based on physical appearance and the presence of material and visual markers of Roman Catholicism. These include but are not limited to: the Virgin of Guadalupe, rosary beads, and prayer cards that are then included within a larger rubric of “narco-religion”³ These mechanisms of policing also target Afro-Latinx communities; as explored in Aisha Beliso-de Jesús’s forthcoming book, *Excited Delirium: Race, Police Violence, and the Invention of Disease* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024), tying the creation of the medical category “excited delirium” to the criminalization of Afro-Latinx religions. In my historical work, I trace these stereotypes and assumptions of Mexican Catholicism through the nineteenth and early 20th century as justifications for territorial dispossession, disenfranchisement, and discrimination; today they justify immigration restriction, incarceration, and detention.

While “what is at stake?” is not a question included in the prompt for our session, it strikes me as an important consideration in this discussion. The racialization of Latinx religions and religious actors in the United States, the technologies of surveillance along the U.S.-Mexico border, the policing of movement and immigration are linked to our current political moment and social realities.

Changing demographics

Lastly, how can our teaching of Latinx religions adapt to changing definitions of US Latinidad, and diversity more broadly? Does the term Latinx religion refer to religion originating in Latin America, or to the religion experienced, performed, and done by Latinx people? Is it both?

The racial and religious demographics of Latines is shifting. According to a UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Institute analysis, 886,000 people in the US identify as Latinx Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders in 2022, doubling in just a decade. This includes mixed race Asian Latinxs and immigrants from Latin American countries.⁴ In U.S. religion we learn often about Sikh Mexicans⁵ in the 20th century as exceptions to our understandings of Latinx religious identity, but we know there is a history of transnational movement between Latin American and Asia as far back as the colonial period with the Manila exchange.⁶ In *The Latinos of Asia: How Filipino Americans Break the Rules of Race*, Anthony Christian Ocampo demonstrates the potential flexibility of the category of “Latinx,” citing cross-ethnic affinities between Filipino Americans and Mexican Americans based on shared linguistic and religious heritage because of Spanish colonialism.

The U.S.-Mexico border, as one example, also reflects diversity and shifting migration patterns. There is a long history of Chinese migration into border cities like Nogales

and Mexicali.⁷ Similarly, Mexicali and Tijuana have recently become important cities for considering Haitian migration. Additionally, according to 2022 Pew data, while Latinx identification with Catholicism has declined by 24%, 30% of Latinos now identify as religiously unaffiliated.⁸

Though many of us, as instructors, are often limited to teaching Latinx religion in survey courses, one approach may be to consider how Latinx religion can be included into thematic discussions of religion (some of which have been and will be explored at this conference.) In other words, we can consider how the diversity of Latinx religious experiences that track with and map onto the larger categories of U.S. religions.

To end, I'd like to return to the question: What are we missing with this oversimplification? I offer you the following:

The love and light, and the *mucho, mucho amor*, of Walter Mercado

The Bhagavad Gita of Francisco Madero

Intergalactic corn kernels of humanity on Zapatista futurist spaceships⁹

Haitian migrants in Tijuana botánicas

The Yee family ex-voto at the shrine of Juan Soldado

Dominican death metal Tibetan Buddhism¹⁰

Día de los Muertos celebrations at Satanic Temples

The psycho-shamanism and *psicomagia* of Alejandro Jodorowsky

Religion and Disability

Religious communities have often been at the forefront of providing services and support for people with varying health, social, and economic needs. However, this attention to difference has not always translated to a thoughtful encounter with the ways in which ability operates differently regarding neurodiversity, varied abilities, and access. Considering questions of access that focus on embodied religious practice and embodiment more broadly, how do the contested concepts of “disability” and “religion” provide a novel space to think critically about inclusion, visibility, and access? How have theories around embodiment, ability, and activism opened new arenas for protest and belonging—particularly with regard to religious spa

Erik Carter

Baylor University

“Flourishing Together? Disability and American Churches”

The landscape of religious communities is certainly changing. In this brief talk, I’ll highlight some of what we are learning about the prevailing practices and postures of churches across the country. My accent here will be on the religious experiences of the 7 million Americans with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families. Individuals who frequently find themselves on the peripheries of the communities that matter most to them.

Changing Communities

To frame our own research on congregational inclusion, I’ll situate this within the broader movements within our country across my own lifetime of 50 years. Figure 1 illustrates five different portraits of community life in relation to people with developmental disabilities and their families. I’ll move from the left to the right, focusing on the top terms.

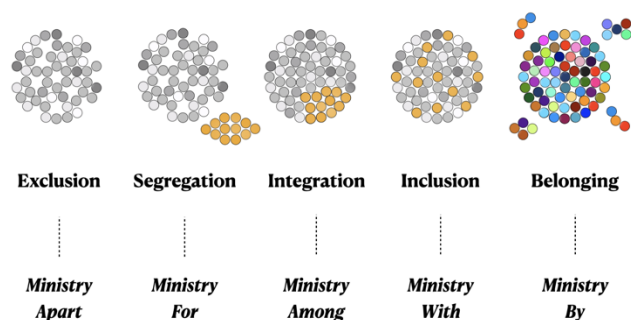


Figure 1. Changing Portraits of Community in the Culture and the Church

Exclusion. Throughout so much of the last century, people with developmental disabilities were intentionally excluded from everyday school, work, and community activities. Barriers of attitude, awareness, architecture, and imagination (among others) converged to limit who could (and was expected to) participate in community life. Essential people were missing; communities were incomplete.

Segregation. As new policies and laws were passed, many of the new opportunities that emerged still served to segregate people with developmental disabilities from others. Special schools, sheltered workshops, and institutions meant that the lives of people with and without disabilities rarely intersected. Separate was the *de facto* choice made for them before ever meeting them.

Integration. In the 1980s and 1990s, people with developmental disabilities were increasingly integrated into typical community

activities. But a certain separation persisted. A special education classroom down a rarely traveled hallway in school. A large group home tucked in a hidden corner of town. People with disabilities were *near*, but still not *among*, their peers without disabilities.

Inclusion. Over the last two decades, however, the emphasis has shifted toward including people with developmental disabilities in the same classrooms, clubs, colleges, and community groups as anyone else. Communities are widening their welcome and expanding their support. People with and without disabilities are no longer *apart from* one another and are now *with* one another.

Belonging. But there is a pursuit beyond mere integration and inclusion—toward becoming communities in which belonging abounds. Where people’s views of one another are transformed—there is no hierarchy of bodies and minds, no us and them. Co-location transforms into co-laboring; acquaintances develop into friendships.

Do these strike you as very different portraits of communities? This progression of history depicts a movement from the margins toward the middle; from exclusion toward embrace. And it is marked and moved by increasing activism, advocacy, and awareness. But here is the twist—this is not past history, but living history. Not just in schools and workplaces, but also in churches. This is one map of the current landscape of congregations across the U.S.. Examples abound of churches marked by the exclusion, segregation, or integration of people with developmental disabilities (and other disabled people as well). A growing number of churches are experienced as places of true inclusion and deep belonging. This is a modest—but accelerating—movement of prepositions: from ministry *apart* or *for* disabled people to ministry *with* and *by* disabled people.

Changing Churches

With this background in mind, I’ll now turn to our research on churches. I’ll move again from the left to the right of Figure 1, focusing on the bottom phrases.

Ministry Apart. Although few congregations intentionally exclude disabled people, long-ago and present-day choices about where and how a community gathers lead in the very same direction. The ways buildings and spaces are designed, prevailing expectations for behavior and participation, and approaches to preaching and teaching—each communicates something about who is expected to be part of a particular community. Exclusion is the natural outcome of unintentionality. Of course, experiences of deliberate exclusion also abound.

Wounding remarks, penetrating stares, refused support, revoked invitations, denied baptisms, and referrals elsewhere—these are all among the testimonies evident in our studies of individuals and families. Indeed, one-third of parents left their congregation because their child with disabilities was not welcomed.

Ministry For. One response to exclusion has been to establish new ministries to (or for) people with developmental disabilities. Examples include separate Bible studies for local group home residents, segregated worship services, and separate social gatherings in which everyone without a developmental disability is a volunteer. Churches are often mirroring practices evident elsewhere in the culture. Moreover, their starting assumption may be that distinct approaches are necessary for people they consider to have “different or special needs.” However, separate programs are most often established because the rest of a congregation remains resistant to altering its current practices. It is less decision and more reaction.

Ministry Among. More and more churches—especially larger ones—are creating formal programs focused on integrating people with developmental disabilities into worship, learning, and service. A prominent example involves offering specialized classes for children or adults as an alternative to the usual experiences of everyone else. Yet, when specialized options remain the *only* options, the likelihood that people with and without developmental disabilities will encounter one another, develop new friendships, and discover their need for one another is diminished. It is quite common for congregants to know about their church’s “disability ministry,” but still not know the names of anyone who is involved. Launching specialized options can also keep churches from reflecting on and addressing barriers to inclusion in typical activities.

Ministry With. Inclusion means ensuring every member is encouraged and supported to participate in the same breadth of valued experiences as anyone else—worshiping together, learning together, serving together, and fellowship together. We are learning that inclusive ministry requires casting a church-wide vision, equipping leaders and volunteers to live it out, promoting awareness, individualizing supports, incorporating universal design, embracing flexibility, reflecting regularly, and remaining ever-imaginative. In many churches, a commitment to inclusion emerges from core theological beliefs. As members with and without developmental disabilities share their faith and friendship—their care and companionship—they also tend to pull further away from practices that prevent these exchanges. However, inclusion must mean more than welcoming someone’s presence without changing how a community gathers.

Ministry By. Faithful communities are committed to ministry with *and* by people with developmental disabilities. Belonging involves more than mere presence—people are also invited, welcomed, known, accepted, supported, heard, befriended, needed, and loved. In such churches, disabled people serve and lead. They are considered indispensable and valued members

whose absence is missed. They enrich and enliven their community. This remains a growing edge for congregations, as it is for the rest of the culture. It is an opportunity for imagination and leadership.

Future Directions

I hope this brief (and certainly limited) overview helps illustrate the changing relationship between religion and disability in America—both past and present. Numerous intriguing questions remain:

- What are the markers of faithful and flourishing religious communities related to disability and neurodiversity?
- What are the postures and practices of congregations that lead toward (and away from) inclusion and belonging?
- What does it take to spur and sustain real transformation in religious communities?
- How are the movements of churches shaping and being shaped by the surrounding culture?

Faith matters in the lives of many people with developmental disabilities and their families. Much more work is needed to understand how the practices and postures of faith communities might move in the direction of greater inclusion and belonging for every member.

Andrew Walker-Cornetta

Georgia State University

“Rules of the Game: Disability, Religion, and Inclusion”

In April of this year, I was watching the NCAA women’s basketball championship game with my four- and six-year-old children. They are starting to get interested in the sport and it was their nascent knowledge of some of its basic rules that led to their confusion during a commercial break. In a spot produced by the omnipresent PSA machine The Foundation for a Better Life, a young woman whom viewers are meant to recognize as having Down Syndrome is subbed into a basketball game as the clock winds down. “Sarah, you got this,” her coach says, and Sara Barelliss’ pop-anthem “Brave” blares over the scene. In slow motion, Sarah gets the ball, the other players get out of the way, and she drains a jump shot, fingers crossed while it sails in slow motion through the air. The crowd goes wild and the camera pans to an opposing player who says to the referee, inquiringly: “but, they lost.” To which he responds, “Not really, not where it counts.” Both teams surround Sarah and chant her name. “You Got This,” the ad concludes, “Pass it On.”¹

“Why were they cheering for her?” my kids asked. “They weren’t on her team.” “Did she win the game?” No, I said and mumbled something about “what people call disability” and it being complicated. I said maybe she wasn’t as good at basketball as the other players but that her friends wanted to give her the chance to be a part of the game and to have the feeling of winning. The next morning at breakfast the six-year-old asked, “How old was Sarah?” I didn’t know who she was talking about, two sips into my coffee. “The girl from the commercial,” she clarified. “Maybe sixteen,” I responded, “the same age as the other players, I guess.” I was tired and, although it was obvious that my inquisitor was unsatisfied with both the commercial and my explanations, I left it at that, relieved that she had retreated, giving up on my ability to help her understand.

One fruitful way to approach a text like this in a context like this conference would be to situate it within broader Christian (and often explicitly “Judeo-Christian”) performances of *being a good sport* in American culture. That account could

document how what the late Australian comedian Stella Young called “inspiration porn” fits within a longer genealogy of positive thinking, New Thought, and bootstrapism—i.e., the particular ways in which disability has been tasked historically with proving the power of attitude.² In that vein, one might also trace in a more straightforward manner the crypto-Christian program of the organization behind this commercial (the Anschutz Family Foundation) and the rest of the Pass it On ad campaign.³ That account might also help us think about the particular ways in which cognitive disability and especially Down Syndrome have been mobilized in the wider context of the so-called “culture wars.”⁴

But I think my kids’ responses to the commercial offer still another angle for regarding it as a document of religion and American culture, one that’s afforded by their not having, at least in this instance, the concept of disability as what the philosopher Tanya Titchkosky calls a “sense-making” device.⁵ Their questions put pressure on what is common sense about an ad like this and serve as a prompt to—as our organizers’ questions have it—to “think critically about inclusion.” They were asking: *but, wait, is this still basketball? Has the game changed for Sarah? And what do those changes say about her?* In doing so, they seem to invite another series of questions: who are projects and performances of inclusion like this for? What’s being organized here? And for whom? (To put it still another way, what problems do performances of inclusion pose and purportedly solve?)⁶

In my current research, I’m exploring a different scene of inclusionary ambition: mid-twentieth century American Catholics’ efforts to incorporate persons with what we would now call cognitive disabilities into the ritual life of Catholic churches and US society more broadly. These were announced efforts to re-member a population often referred to at the time as “forgotten children” through the development of educational opportunities, new institutions, and a sprawling public relations campaign. I show how Catholics mobilized these forms of difference to renegotiate their identities—as Americans and as Catholics—in what Robert Orsi has described as an “asynchronous” moment for many Catholic communities—ways of both announcing their disjuncture from the mainstream postwar society to which they’d gained new access and their bone fides as something like the nation’s moral leaven.⁷ And toward the end of the project, I turn to a text that I think is responding to these developments in ways that also speak to our organizers’ prompts.

As the title suggests, Flannery O’Connor’s second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away* (published 1960), is a bruised and bruising book.⁸ Its plot revolves around a white fourteen-year-old Tennessee boy’s wrestling with a calling to become a prophet and to baptize his cousin whom the characters of the novel identify as an “idiot.” This character, named Bishop, becomes an occasion for O’Connor to offer—as Catholic intellectual—her typical send-ups of secular liberalism and what she takes to be its latent (and sometimes direct) violence.⁹ She puts into the mouths of the characters around Bishop the kind of social scientific jargon that transforms disability into either pure deficiency—“he’s just a mistake of nature,”¹⁰ a character quips—or something metabolized through rehabilitation into the grind of modern social reproduction. (Here the telos of personhood is to be “a normal person.”)¹¹ I read the novel, among other things, as a critique of the postwar era’s rehabilitative optimism: the

insistence that disabled persons could be made to approximate a normal, which often meant laboring, life, and Catholics' embrace of it. And I suggest that this critique is motivated by O'Connor sense that these incorporative projects ultimately amounted to ethical failures—failures to actually reckon with, to borrow a phrase from the anthropologists Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, “the difference that disability makes.”¹²

To take Bishop seriously, his vulnerability, and that of other people like him—beyond what one of O'Connor's contemporaries called “tinsel tolerance”¹³—would endanger the world in its current state, the novel suggests. It would require the abandonment of the fantasies of self-possession and human agency that underwrote the postwar political order, and would require a more robust recognition of one's continuity with others, human and non-human. (This is indicated in the book through a) Bishop's father's efforts to resist a kind of mystical love that his son elicits, one that threatens his sanity, and b) a satanic character's warnings about how care for Bishop might threaten other social boundaries, including racial ones.)

For O'Connor these representations supported a particular apocalyptic vision and it is not entirely clear what sorts of political arrangements they might support or animate (although there are suggestions elsewhere in her work).¹⁴ But what is clear is the novel's convictions about the potential conservatism of inclusion as a social project (how it can work to keep things the same) and about how disability was and ought to be more disruptive than liberal appropriations of it allow. Part of what O'Connor seemed to be asking was what kind of society—what forms of collectivity—would truly be hospitable to a person like Bishop? And what would have to be destroyed to make that world possible?

In many ways, what I'm gesturing toward with these two examples is another version of what are by now relatively common, if still unheeded, challenges to inclusion and its analogs. I have in mind Sara Ahmed's *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* and, in disability studies, work by Jasbir Puar, Tanya Titchkosky, and others.¹⁵ Such work has insisted on how announcements of inclusion and incorporation often function disciplinarily, leaving exclusionary structures and rules intact and, often, adding to their power.¹⁶

Part of what I think my children's questions and O'Connor's book help us to do is to join this critical work by inviting us to theorize inclusion as a site of religious work, or, at minimum, as locations where the tools of religious studies are particularly helpful for interpreting their effects and exchanges. Our field, of course, has rich resources for thinking critically about what engagements with socially produced anomaly can accomplish for collectives. Here we can turn to Mary Douglas's *Purity & Danger*, in which she reminds us how human cultures' engagements with the out of place do not always occasion exclusion, aversion, and repression. Sometimes, she notes, societies enfold what registers as anomalous within themselves

as a means of “enrich[ing] meaning or [...] call[ing] attention to other levels of existence.” We make use of it. And she cautions us in our readings of such cultural work not to mistake it for disruption, or at least not too quickly: “We [by which she means societies] can and do reflect with profit on our main classifications and on experiences which do not exactly fit them. [But] In general,” she explains, “these reflections confirm our confidence in the main classifications.”¹⁷ Things stay put.

It seems to me part of the challenge in the wake of the disability rights movement and renewed demands to include people with disabilities in various communities (explicitly religious and otherwise) is to ask what such projects are for, what they maintain, and what they disregard.

What kinds of collectives and values do texts like the commercial with which I began bring into being—and what meanings and ways of inhabiting difference remain impossible?¹⁸

Hannah Zaves-Greene

Sarah Lawrence College

My training is in American Jewish history, so I'm going to present a brief case study from my research for my current book project on American Jews, immigration policy, and disability, which I hope will give us some concrete tools to think together about the broader themes this panel raises.

On March 3, 1891, the United States Congress passed a new immigration law. Expanding the public charge provision of 1882, this law excluded “[a]ll idiots, insane persons, paupers or persons likely to become a public charge, [and] persons suffering from a loathsome or a dangerous contagious disease,” while subjecting immigrants who received financial aid for their passage to intensive inspection. Rooted in eugenics, the law presumed inextricable connections between race, ethnicity, and disability, assuming that people from specific parts of the world were allegedly predisposed to specific physical and mental conditions. Effectively, a cudgel in the hands of immigration restrictionists, public charge codified and conflated real or alleged mental and physical illness, disabilities, and poverty as legal justifications to debar and deport “undesirable” immigrants.

These restrictions immediately captivated the American Jewish press, organizational leadership, and legal establishment. Public charge's pathologization of poverty and commodification of health, one newspaper reported, threatened Russian Jews searching for new homes in America. American Jews of the time, however, did not—at least in public—question the premise of the law itself: that an immigrant's alleged illness or disability by default made them a burden upon the nation.

In the ensuing years, Congress further tightened public charge to curb immigration still more. Its 1903 and 1906 revisions included people with epilepsy, “persons who have been insane within five years . . . imbeciles, feeble-minded persons, [and] mentally or physically defective persons, whose defect may affect the ability of such an alien to earn a living.”¹ Throughout, American Jews continued to protest against immigration officials' abuse of the policy, most especially the negative vision of the Jewish body and mind that the law's administration fostered and its corresponding impact on Jewish immigrants.

Precisely this plight befell fourteen-year-old Blume Shapiro in 1911, when state physicians diagnosed her as insane—a mental status frequently ascribed particularly to Jewish women and girls, and sometimes men—and institutionalized her in the Manhattan State Hospital, ultimately resulting in an order of deportation. Blume's story began when the New York State Commission in Lunacy endeavored to force her deportation as a public charge, premised on what turned out to be not only a flawed, but cherry-picked, interpretation of the public charge statute.² By the time that prominent American Jewish attorney

Max Kohler and his legal partner Abram Elkus came on board, federal authorities had already suspended the execution of Blume's deportation warrant so her parents could pay for her care, but the state refused to accept any funds from her family—and if the state needed to pay for her medical care, that made her a public charge subject to deportation.³ Kohler, the son of Kaufmann Kohler and grandson of David Einhorn, founders of American Reform Judaism, had grown up steeped in a commitment to justice as a Jewish religious obligation since his childhood. His legal work, as such, functioned in large part as a logical extension of his particular idiom of Jewishness.

Blume had arrived in New York with her family in 1909, and allegedly, according to Kohler's notes, “suddenly became insane after residing here about two years.”⁴ As promised, her family paid the pre-set sum of \$3.50 a week for a state institution, which her mother had stated was the most that the family could afford when offered the choice between a private facility at \$15 per week or a state facility at the lower fee.⁵ Blume's doctors issued a positive prognosis, indicating that she progressed well and that they expected to discharge her fully cured from the hospital. But since the hospital had disingenuously misrecorded Blume's family's financial status at the time of her admission, placing them in a higher socioeconomic bracket than they reported, the Commission in Lunacy stated that the hospital had received insufficient compensation for Blume's care. Her family desperately offered to pay as much as \$5 per week as the crisis escalated, but the Commission illegally and “arbitrarily refused to fix any reimbursing charge . . . to receive such compensation when tendered,” Kohler wrote, and to accept a governmental bond against “future accruing charges.”⁶

Making matters worse, Blume's diagnosis itself remained questionable at best, the product of a skewed administration of the law rather than a true representation of her mental health. Without regard for the truth, doctors routinely issued “misleading” certificates claiming that immigrants' insanity “originated prior to landing,” a required condition for deportation under public charge. In New York, this regularly culminated in skirmishes between the state and federal government, at the expense of the hapless immigrants caught in between.⁷ Under Kohler's leadership, a cohort of American Jewish attorneys seized on Blume's situation as an opportunity to highlight New York State authorities' abuse of public charge as a vehicle to deport unwanted immigrants.

New York, Kohler asserted, overreached its authority in manipulating public charge, wielding it as a rationale to deport immigrants. Moreover, the Commission had lied to the judge who would rule on Blume's case, asserting that she was “incurably sick,” an easily disprovable fact given the existence of a letter from Blume's physician affirming precisely the reverse.⁸ Manifestly, the Commission was “in error as a matter of law” by dishonestly

representing Blume's illness and her family's financial status.⁹

Bypassing the Commission entirely, Kohler penned a letter directly to Governor John A. Dix of New York, requesting that he confirm the status of public charge regulations with the federal Attorney General. Specifically, he asked the governor to verify the statutory directives regarding mentally ill immigrants who had lived in the United States for under three years. As Kohler understood it, he deferentially wrote, the law required the Commission to fix standard rates for all prospective patients irrespective of citizenship, rather than determine rates on a case-by-case basis after hospital admission. The Commission, conversely, through what Kohler diplomatically referred to as its "misconstruction" of public charge, had "committed and is continuing to commit, grave errors affecting the rights and liberty of a number of unfortunates" by preferring citizens to immigrants for treatment in state institutions.¹⁰ "Pursuant to their directions," he informed the governor, "aliens are, on occasion, refused admission to State asylums, and establishment of rates for them is at times refused, and they are discriminated against, in favor of citizens . . . all of which we understand to be illegal and in violation of the State and federal constitutions and subsisting treaties."¹¹

Since, Kohler said, he assumed that the Commission must doubtlessly have misunderstood the law and acted based on an honest mistake, he urged the governor to provide its members with an "authoritative exposition of their duties."¹² Kohler asserted that he had no intention of "submitting charges" against them, but desired to "call this matter to [the governor's] attention" so that the governor could correct the error of the Commission's ways.¹³

His letter evidently had the desired effect. Less than a month later Acting Secretary of Labor Ben Cable determined that Blume did not qualify as a public charge from "prior existing causes," canceling all warrants of arrest and deportation and permitting her to remain in the United States.¹⁴ Her case, at least on paper, contributed to a new precedent regarding public charge that Jewish attorney Simon Wolf shared at the next meeting of the National Jewish Immigration Council. "Under the law authorizing deportation of persons who have become public charges from causes existing prior to landing," he announced, "it must be shown where the alien became insane after landing, that the insanity itself existed at the time of landing, and not mere insane tendencies or incipient insanity."¹⁵

Blume, a Jewish immigrant girl whose purported mental illness nearly resulted in her deportation from the United States, does not stand alone. About a year before Kohler took on Blume's case, he had noted the controversy over the exclusion of immigrants whom examining physicians certified as "defective" in a recommendation he wrote to Congress.¹⁶ Secretary of Labor Charles Nagel, the son of immigrants himself, happened to agree with Kohler, as they discussed the

issue in early January 1911 before the Council of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. "[Y]ou may call me a lawbreaker if you want," Nagel declared, "but if I break the law it is in behalf of the alien and not against him."¹⁷ As Kohler well knew, autocratic immigration officials had a storied past of bending public charge to their will, while Congress looked the other way. Blume, thanks to Kohler's intervention, managed to obtain justice. Her experience, however, represents but one among the fragments remaining in the historical record, of the

thousands of immigrants termed "defective" who lacked a Max Kohler to come to their aid.

When Academic Terms Go Popular

Critical Race Theory. White Christian Nationalism. The “nones.” Spiritual but not religious. Whiteness. Intersectionality. Climate change. Culture Wars. These are terms that were initiated in scholarly work but have become part of the common lexicon in today’s news and politics. What happens when the academy loses control of terminology that is then politicized, racialized, or gendered in popular conversation? How should those working in religion respond, and how should we think about our work when this popularization is always a possibility?

Anthea Butler

University of Pennsylvania

“You’re Already Too Late”

If you’re asking why certain terms have left the academic realm and become the language of the public, pundits, politicians and provocateurs, you don’t understand where the academy is in 2024. Because you believe you are a protected class, and that your hallowed pronouncements in the academy can’t possibly be understood or weaponized by that rabble called the public.

Let me hip you to the reality.

Inherent in the question posed to our panel is a supposition: that we own the right to the terms we create in the academy. These terms aren’t trademarked, and while these terms have specific meanings to us theoretically, people who aren’t academics don’t care. People outside of the academy who are deploying the terms like CRT, Christian Nationalism, intersectionality, and antisemitism are repurposing them for their own means¹. Our guardrails, our research, our shibboleths are nothing to them.

While we define our terms, and do our research, and wait for journal articles in print to be published in 1 to 3 years, or books to be published, our interlocutors are on virtual platforms, podcasts, and other spaces using these terms to foster their own agendas, which are mostly about division and divisiveness. The terms that we so handily use become weaponized, and often against our scholarship, or even our person.

Those of us who are working in African American religion or more broadly, ethnic studies of religion, have used Critical race theory or intersectionality to describe parts of our work, or to inform our analysis. Since CRT and intersectionality have been co-opted as a poisoned term by Christopher Rufo and others, we have seen the rise of book banning, firings of DEI hires and other programs focused on students of ethnicity closed. CRT Forward, a program housed at the UCLA school of Law, has been tracking attacks on CRT. Since September 2020, there have been 247 local state and national entities that have introduced 807 anti-Critical Race Theory bills, resolutions, executive orders, opinion letters, statements, and other measures.²

That’s not all. Since the weaponization of CRT, DEI programs are being scaled back or eliminated altogether. Texas law SB 17, which went into effect January 1, the bill bans DEI and its programs, clubs, and organizations within the University of Texas college system, the largest university system in the state with more than 250,000 enrolled students and 21,000 faculty. In April 2024, more than 80 faculty members in two public universities in Texas were fired for their previous jobs in diversity, equity, and inclusion departments (DEI). multicultural centers were closed and realigned their practices to comply with [SB 17](#).³

So, for those of us engaged in the teaching of race and ethnicity, the stakes are high. Intense scrutiny by outsiders of syllabi, scholarly writing and speaking engagements may trigger administrative actions that want to stifle or curb the work that we do at the behest of voices outside of the academy.

Consider the term Christian Nationalism.⁴ In the wake of January 6th, scholars used this term to talk about the religious aspects of the insurrection, and several books came out about this, including Andrew Whitehead’s book on Christian nationalism. Historians of American Religion and American politics can trace this term back to the 1930’s, but outsiders to the term that identify with it have embraced it, such as Marjorie Taylor Green or people like David Barton. Media Personalities who use this term in an ahistorical way, to denote a kind of religious patriotism associated with one political party makes in difficult deal with media personalities who use the term in ahistorical ways, or those in our own professions who believe that using the term is a fool’s errand, because it does not adequately explain the history surrounding the terms.⁵ David French put it this way in a New York Times [op-ed](#) in the. “If you’re alarmed by the rise of Christian nationalism, the single worst thing you can do is define it too broadly. If you define it too broadly, then you’re telling millions of ordinary churchgoing citizens that the importation of their religious values into the public square somehow places them in the same camp or on the same side as actual Christian supremacists, the illiberal authoritarians who want to remake America in their own fundamentalist image.”

I’d counter that by saying that the worst thing you can do is to define it ahistorically. To be fair to French, he does cite Perry and Whitehead in his op-ed, giving their definition of Christian nationalism. But countless others don’t, and as a result, this term has become weaponized in various ways.

What I believe is useful

For some of us, the mere fact that these terms go out into the public can mean either accolades or abuse. It can also put us in the position of justifying our scholarship, not just to outsiders, but to our students as well. I believe we must begin to think through the public use of terminologies in our fields with attention to the following, which I am happy to talk about more in the discussion. For now, let me set out a few things that I think will be helpful in this rapidly changing and potentially dangerous environment.

1. Give students not only terms, but history of terms and their development so they can understand not only use but context.
2. Keep up with terms that are currently in public

discourse and academic discourse. If you are using them in the classroom, consider that students will pull descriptions not just from normal sources, but from AI as well. Be ready for that.

3. If you teach a subject that is under scrutiny- use discretion on what and where you put things online. Syllabi are often used by outsiders to attack professors/ programs. Don't share your materials with people/ students who you don't personally know or have not vetted.

We are in a different environment in the classroom. Every lecture should be considered a public lecture, and the terms we have felt comfortable using are being weaponized. It is imperative now more than ever to remain true to our profession, but at the same time, to try and mitigate the attacks that will come no matter what because of political opinions, and not facts and research.

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Mark Silk

Trinity University

“Why Popularization is a Good Thing”

Mea culpa. I begin with a confession because as a cultural historian and as a journalist, I am guilty of profiting from and engaging in the popularization of academic terminology. I began my career in American religious studies by writing a history of use of the term Judeo-Christian, an exercise in what the Germans call *Begriffsgeschichte* — concept history — that is normal and customary for the kind of medieval historian I was trained to be. “Judeo-Christian” was at first something of a technical coinage, and is used today by religion scholars as a matter of course to identify this, well, religious tradition. But the term began to pass into public parlance on the eve of World War II, and the article I wrote for JAAR forty years ago used it to trace an important bit of the ideological politics of the previous half century.¹ Such popularization is, in short, great grist for the cultural historian’s mill.

In the journalistic arena, I believe I contributed to popularizing one of our prompt’s examples: “the nones.” So far as I can tell, the term originates with Glenn Vernon’s 1968 article in JSSR, “The Religious ‘Nones’: A Neglected Category.”² But the popularization of the term didn’t take place until the first decade of the present century, after Barry Kosmin and Ariella Keysar’s 2001 American Religious Identification Survey detected (and *USA Today*’s Cathy Grossman reported) a near doubling in the proportion American nones over the previous decade. Despite some initial skepticism from other researchers, subsequent studies confirmed their findings and “the rise of the nones” was off and running. It’s notable that both Pew and PRRI, which we may consider key sources of popularization when it comes to religion in America, initially resisted the scholarly usage in favor of “unaffiliated”; it’s worth asking why.

While Pew gradually shifted to “nones,” PRRI continues to insist on “unaffiliated.” Whatever, as we heard yesterday, the proportion of Americans who say they have no religion has risen remarkably over the past several decades. While there has, in my view, been some misunderstanding of the significance of this fact, it does not seem to me to be markedly greater on the popular than on the academic side.

Then there’s “culture wars.” The term is, of course, a direct translation of *Kulturkampf*, which was coined by the German physician, academic, and public intellectual Rudolf Virchow to describe Bismarck’s efforts to restrict the power of the Catholic Church after the unification of Germany in 1871. James Davidson Hunter’s book *Culture Wars*, published in November 1991, put the term on the American academic map; but a year earlier, *U.S. News and World Report* published a long piece by Steven Roberts and Dorian Friedman titled, “Conservatives

are using flag burning, obscenity and other hot-button issues to win votes,” that included the sentence: “Welcome to the culture wars of 1990.” So it was 10 years after the emergence of what was first called “the new religious right” for what was going on to be called “the culture war” or “wars.” Here again, academic and popular usage coincided; indeed, popular usage seems to have slight precedence.

Or take “spiritual but not religious.” As a demographic category for academic study, this now hackneyed expression dates from “Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzifying the Fuzzy,” a 1997 article in JSSR by Kenneth Pargament and a group of doctoral students in psychology at Bowling Green State.³ But the popular usage antedates the academic — indeed, precisely because people began describing themselves that way. A year prior to the article, for example, the *Salt Lake Tribune* quoted the master of the local Rosicrucian order as describing herself as “spiritual, but not religious.”⁴ In such a case, it seems to me, the desideratum is to determine what people mean when they so self-identify, as opposed to lamenting a lack of control over a concept academics themselves didn’t create.

Moving on, a number of the terms listed in our prompt are employed in the public sphere precisely because the academics who invented or made scholarly careers using them have wanted them to be. “Climate change” is a case in point. Academic (scientific) usage preceded journalistic usage, but not by much; both began their journey around 1980. Not that the warnings about the phenomenon didn’t begin much earlier. In 1957, Roger Revelle testified to Congress on the climatic implications of his oceanographic research showing that the oceans had only a limited ability to absorb carbon dioxide. I myself heard Revelle talk about this at a seminar for European bureaucrats in the summer of 1968. What’s important to recognize is that here it has been the academic community itself that is eager for the public at large to recognize what is going on in the environment — and to do something about it. In other words, academics themselves may be the popularizers of a term, with a political agenda in mind.

The origins of “White Christian nationalism” are admittedly complex. It has antecedents in the avowed “Christian nationalism” of the notorious public antisemite Gerald L.K. Smith. It also makes a kind of backhand reference to the Black nationalist tradition, which includes the Black Christian nationalism of Albert Cleage. And like such other religious insults as “Quakers,” it has to some degree been embraced by its advocates. In its current usage, its founding proponent may be not an academic but a journalist, Michelle Goldberg, whose book, *Kingdom Coming: the Rise of Christian Nationalism*, was published in 2006. Since then, academics

have thrown themselves into the fray, and have not been shy about popularizing the term by discussing their work in public forums. The subtitle of Andrew Whitehead's latest book, *American Idolatry*, is hardly an ivory tower exercise, not with the subtitle: "How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church."

As for "critical race theory" and "whiteness," whatever the analytic value of these concepts in understanding contemporary society — and it is considerable — they also have not been intended merely as an exercise in intellectual analysis. They manifest politically engaged scholarship, both within and outside the academy — and I don't say that to denigrate it. One is entitled, one may feel compelled, to put CRT and whiteness to use politically. But when one does, one should be prepared for the other side to flatten, caricature, and even demonize the terminology — and to take steps to suppress it. Politics, as Richard Nixon's attorney general John Mitchell famously said, ain't beanbag. It *is* a game that academics need to learn how to play better.

The issue before this panel does call to mind the exchange between Alice and Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass*.

"When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."

Lewis Carroll (Charles Dodgson) was an Oxford don and it is not a stretch to see Humpty Dumpty as a satire of his kind. We academics do want to be master of words, of concepts. But I'm afraid we can't be. It behooves us to recognize that, and behave accordingly.

One example: Lee Babouf, an Arizona State English professor who received his Ph.D in American Studies from Purdue, described Critical Whiteness Studies in one of his syllabi as "concerned with dismantling white supremacy in part by understanding how whiteness is socially constructed and experienced."⁵ He's listed on the ASU media relations page as having "expertise is in critical race theory...able to speak on issues of race, gender, ethnicity, immigration and politics."

Carlton Waterhouse

Howard University

“Critical Race Theory”

Critical Race Theory or CRT has garnered massive attention in the United States—largely through the protests and vilification of politicians and parents seeking to protect children from studying the “dangerous” theory. To begin, despite its name, CRT is not a theory. Instead, it reflects an area of scholarship that engages a broad range of theories. It originates in the scholarship of Professor Derrick Bell. Professor Bell was the first black law professor tenured at Harvard law school. Before joining the Harvard Law School faculty, Professor Bell was a prominent civil rights attorney who worked with the NAACP in dismantling the legal infrastructure of America’s Jim Crow system of racial segregation.ⁱ Professor Bell gained notoriety when he left Harvard to teach at the New York University Law School in protest over Harvard’s failure to hire any women of color to the faculty.ⁱⁱ As a scholar, Professor Bell deeply engaged the reversal of the Supreme Court’s prior commitments to civil rights seen through its decisions in the late 1970s and into the 1980s. In his writing, he brought a critical lens to the new race based civil rights opinions pronounced by the Court. This perspective, critically challenging the race-based jurisprudence of the Court as a systematic denial of rights for people of color laid the foundation for CRT. Many scholars, following Bell’s engagement, also criticized the Court’s race jurisprudence drawing on a diverse set of theoretical perspectives, including continental philosophers. In conferences and meetings, scholars brought a panoply of theories and approaches to challenge the Court’s assault on the rights of people of color that developed into a body of scholarship.ⁱⁱⁱ

I write in areas related to CRT and have taught CRT courses across my legal career. While I am not an expert on CRT, I can say that the notion that CRT was being taught in elementary or even high school was ludicrous at best. As challenging as it can be to get law students to read CRT or any other any law journal articles, the idea that K-12 students with no legal education would do so was laughable, but it was also instructive of how quickly knee-jerk reactions to perceived threats to the status quo can be generated. The standard textbook for law students across the curriculum is a casebook—an edited volume of heavily edited short case excerpts consisting of a few pages. The reason law students avoid law journal articles is their density, length, and complexity. In my experience, articles that mix case analysis and theoretical underpinnings or broader arguments from social science are the most demanding to read and comprehend and the least popular among students. At fifty or more pages with over two hundred footnotes, law students often must read and reread this form of legal scholarship which

is rarely assigned outside of small seminar courses comprised largely of students in their last year or last semester of law school. Since very few high school teachers and even fewer students will be trained in case analysis, their ability to read and understand case analysis married with other themes or theories is unrealistic. Accordingly, in my view, the fuss about “CRT being taught in schools” has little or nothing to do with CRT being taught in schools.

My talk will consist of two stories that reflect how engagement with CRT can have different ramifications at an individual and a public policy level and will hopefully interrogate why anti-CRT protests became a rallying cry for protests across the country.

In 2021, I was nominated by President Joe Biden to serve as the Assistant Administrator for the Office of Land and Emergency Management of the United States Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA). I was appointed to serve as the senior political official and Deputy Assistant Administrator of the office while awaiting confirmation by the United States Senate to Assistant Administrator position. In the meantime, I became a target of conservative media, across the country and even abroad and my scholarship was mischaracterized and misrepresented. Senator Tom Cotton branded me with supporting “racist policies” which became a recurring story across media through the New York Post, the Daily Mail, and other outlets.^{iv} Quoting my scholarship out of context, Fox news further suggested in an online story that I opposed the civil rights laws of the 1960s.^v Stories highlighted a news interview I conducted on the defund the police movement. In the interview, I provided an in-depth explanation of the multiple meanings that defund the police had when raised by different advocates and community activists.^{vi} I went on to note the benefits of making additional investments in crime prevention by funding mental health and other services. Stories reported that I went on Chinese TV to endorse “defunding the police.” The news station had typical call numbers and did not reveal any affiliation with any Chinese television network. Although the negative attention and stories were not raised in my confirmation hearing, they lead to a chilling effect on the republican senators in a closely divided committee—stalling my confirmation.^{vii} While I continued to exercise leadership in the deputy assistant administrator role, the campaign against me successfully slowed my nomination by raising false flags.

My colleague, Professor Wendy Green teaches law at the Drexel University Thomas R. Kline School of Law. Her early scholarship around employee grooming codes grows out of the concept of intersectionality developed by Professor Kimberlee Williams Crenshaw in early Critical Race Theory scholarship that examined the intersection of race and gender in employment discrimination cases.^{viii} Professor Crenshaw’s work noted that employment discrimination claims brought by

African American woman were readily refuted by employers by showing that either African American men were hired or promoted or retained or that white women were hired promoted or retained irrespective of the actual treatment of African American woman by the employer.^{ix} Professor Crenshaw skillfully revealed that the law disregarded discrimination experienced because the victims were both African American and women. Instead, the law focused on employers' treatment of other women of other African Americans to provide a legal justification for the mistreatment of African American women.^x

Applying this insight, Professor Greene's work has gained substantial notoriety for her discussion of racial discrimination through the lens of discrimination against the use of natural hair styles for African Americans. The CROWN Act "Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair" builds on her scholarship and advocacy along with that of other African American woman to prohibit discrimination in schools and in the workplace based on natural hair styles.^{xi} Professor Greene co-authored the CROWN Act^{xii}—which since 2019 has been adopted in 26 states and introduced in the United States Senate and the House of Representatives.^{xiii} Professor Greene's CRT grounded scholarship has helped create a movement for the protection of basic rights and freedoms for children and adults in foundational aspects of their lives.

These two stories highlight the peril and the promise of academic terms "going popular." They reflect how the greater awareness of a person's scholarship can lead to the development of meaningful and important public policy changes that support greater life experiences and protections for people from abuse and mistreatment. Professor Greene's application of CRT has created legal protections in an area that would not likely exist without her intervention and the insights of CRT. My story also illustrates the impacts of academic terms going popular. People opposed to social equity and racial justice will use popular academic terms to incite fear and hostility by sacrificing the truth to reach political objectives. That means academics who engage in intellectual discourse to shape the public understanding of the world, we live in, also risk being misrepresented by others pursuing broader political objectives. I have no regrets. I believe the rewards of protecting people who are mistreated and creating a better world are worth the risks, but I encourage those who do so to be aware that being thrust in the public eye is a two-edged sword—so proceed with caution. We cannot always be certain exactly where it will lead.

Religion & Politics

2024 is an election year with multiple local, state, national, and even global implications. What do you think will be the role of religion in it? Is it changing, or is it like what we've seen in the past? If it is different, is it a difference of kind or degree?

Jonathan S. Coley

Oklahoma State University

“Local-Level Religion-State Relations on the Eve of the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election”

For the past several years, several colleagues (Gary Adler, Eric Plutzer, Damon Mayrl, and Rebecca Sager) and I have been working on a mixed-methods, multi-site project on local-level religion-state relations in the United States. The rationale for our project is that, over the past couple of decades, the U.S. Supreme Court has slowly been moving away from a “separationist” approach to religion-state relations, in which it generally veered on the side of a separation of “church” and “state” in many governmental practices, and has been moving toward an “accommodationist” approach to religion-state relations, in which it increasingly allows for the incorporation of religious symbols and practices in government. For example, in its 2014 decision *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, the Supreme Court ruled that religious chaplains can lead prayers at the start of local public meetings. More recently, in its 2022 decision *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*, the Supreme Court held that a public school football coach could lead his team in a post-game prayer, so long as players were not required to participate.

However, although we know a great deal about how religion-state jurisprudence has been shifting, we know much less about how recent court rulings are playing out at a local level. Are local government officials, and local religious leaders, actually taking advantage of these new opportunities to blur the traditional lines between “church” and “state”? And might they be primed to take advantage of further opportunities going forward?

These questions take on particular importance in light of the upcoming 2024 U.S. Presidential election. This fall, not only will voters be deciding on their next President, but also voters will be helping to decide the future of religion-state relations. The next President may have an opportunity to make one or more U.S. Supreme Court appointments, issue executive orders, and sign or veto legislation holding implications for religion-state relations. But, again, any changes in the boundaries of religion and state will need to be actualized, or put into practice, by local government officials. Are local government officials in the United States primed to put potential changes to religion-state relations into practice?

To answer these questions, in 2020, my colleagues and I ran a pilot survey of government officials in Pennsylvania. More recently, last summer, with funding from the National Science Foundation, my colleagues and I surveyed nearly 1,500 government leaders nationwide across three types of governance—cities, counties, and school districts. Finally, to place the quantitative survey responses in context, we undertook

qualitative follow-up interviews with government leaders who completed the survey. To date, we have completed nearly 150 interviews, each lasting about an hour.

We have reported on results of our survey with Pennsylvania government officials elsewhere (see initial findings in Adler et al. 2020, 2021, 2022), so I’ll start by discussing results of our survey of local government officials last summer. In our nationwide survey we found first that local government officials are quite wary of attempts to explicitly blur, or erase, the separation of “church” and “state.” In our survey, 73% of local government leaders said they favor a “high” wall of separation between religion and government. Only 5% of local government leaders said they would support their state declaring Christianity as its official religion, and only 11% of local government leaders said they thought the United States is a Christian nation.

What is more, local government officials are seemingly wary of attempts to incorporate religion in government. Only 30% of local government officials said they agree with the practice of having prayers at public meetings. And only 21% of local government officials support exempting government employees from certain duties based on their religious beliefs if those exemptions would be costly to the government.

Based on these survey results, you may conclude that any federal government attempts to further blur the lines between “church” and “state” are unlikely to be put into practice at a local level. But let me muddy the waters a bit. In our follow-up interviews, we similarly found that a strong majority of local government leaders expressed preference for a separation of church and state. Yet, when we asked what separation of church and state means to them, and what types of interactions (if any) between religion and government should still be allowed under this separationist paradigm, leaders expressed more complex views.

For example, in these follow-up interviews, although most government officials expressed preferences for a separation of church and state, most then said they were okay with—and/or were already engaging in—practices such as putting up holiday displays on government property (e.g., Christmas trees, Christmas lights) and giving government money to religious organizations that provide social services to the needy. Although it wasn’t a majority, many of the government officials who said they wanted a separation of church and state reported working for local governments that held prayers at the start of public meetings and being okay with the practice.

So, what we seem to be encountering is an expressed, perhaps kneejerk preference for separation of religion and government, but an ambivalence (or pragmatic attitude) toward incorporation

of religion in government in practice. This could potentially create openings for further blurring of the lines between “religion” and “government.”

Here’s more evidence in support of that possibility. Going back to our national survey, we found that the religiosity and religious identities of local government officials generally mirrors that of the U.S. population. We then found that a majority of government officials who identify as Black Protestant meet with religious leaders monthly or more frequently, and close to 40% of Conservative Protestant officials report the same. So, government officials’ own religious identities are sometimes driving them toward more interaction with religious leaders. Not surprisingly, Conservative Protestant government officials are also more likely to favor attempts to blur the line between religion and government as compared to, for example, mainline Protestants, Catholics, or secular officials (see also Adler et al. 2022).

So, there is a segment of local government leaders who are not ambivalent toward questions about separation of church and state, but in favor of attempts to incorporate religion, and in particular Christianity, in government. It is possible these leaders would be more likely to take advantage of any new openings to blur the lines between religion and government that they are given following the 2024 Presidential election, although only time will tell.

The bottom line from our surveys and interviews: most local government leaders express support for the principle of separation of church and state. But we see diversity, and even contradictions, in how that principle is understood and actually put into practice.

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Jamil W. Drake

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“Religion and the 2024 Election”

Note: This paper was given before President Joe Biden’s decision to not seek reelection and support Vice President Kamala Harris’s presidential candidacy/nomination for the 2024 Presidential Elections.

In 2016, white Christians overwhelmingly voted for Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton.¹ Public polls showed that the same support among white Christians was consistent with their vote for Mitt Romney over Barack Obama in the 2012 presidential elections.² Similarly in 2020, Trump garnered the majority of the white Christian vote over Joe Biden. According to a 2020 Pew Report, “more than eight in ten white evangelical Protestant voters who attended religious services frequently (85%) voted for Trump as did 81% of those who attended less frequently.”³ It is expected that white evangelicals/nationalists will largely vote for him again in November’s election.

Critics have been puzzled as to why white Christians have rallied around and supported him. Their puzzlement underlines what critics consider to be Trump’s deviation from the professed Christian (personal)morality/piety representative of his supporters. For critics, Trump’s personal conduct deviates from religious commitments that are espoused by Christian evangelicals on the frontlines of the “culture wars” against their liberal and secular “enemies.” Critics cannot reconcile how Christians can support a candidate who does not espouse or embody their personal beliefs. To be sure, Trump is not an outlier in this sense. Scholars have demonstrated how public “heroes” supported by Christian evangelicals, do not lead personal lives that exactly matched their supporters’ religious and behavioral codes. For instance, J. Edgar Hoover’s so-called private and personal life did not align with evangelical Christian’s personal and moral commitments to family structures used to define America against Communist threat.⁴ Yet, Hoover leveraged the Federal Bureau Investigation (FBI) to publicize the “privacy” and question the personal (moral) conduct of suspects (e.g., “Black Messiahs”) that he and the white public deemed a threat to national security. We are reminded that privacy is a luxury for some, and that “personal conduct” is a political weapon used against specific communities, and has *serious* racial, sexual, gender, and class consequences in U.S. history.

Trump and his supporters willingly embrace and traffic in complete contradictions without blinking. Critics asks: How can House Speaker Mike Johnson who downloaded the Christian anti-pornography surveillance app, *Covenant Eyes*, on his and his son’s monitor, and support a candidate who was recently convicted of 34 counts falsifying business records, including hush money from an extramarital relationship with

Stormi Daniels? How can Christian evangelicals support a candidate who was found liable for sexually abusing and defaming E. Jean Carroll in 1996? How can Christians stand on a “law and order platform and double down on their support for Trump—calling the Jan. 6 insurrectionists “hostages?” The Christian support of Trump recalls Max Weber’s typology of political dominance *based on charisma or personality*.⁵ Critics’ perception regarding Trump’s personal conduct and his white Christian support must be considered alongside pollsters’ conclusions that most Americans (94%) considered personal faith and mortality of the President of the United States (POTUS) to be important.⁶

Founder of the Faith and Freedom Coalition Ralph Reed gave a direct response to questions about Trump’s personal character considering his popularity among Christians. A Christian evangelical, Reed’s response was packaged in a different “nuanced” proposition between private and public “character.” Reed asserted that “character matters,” but the idea that voters of faith or any voters would disqualify someone because of moral failings in the past is just out of step with who the American people are.⁷ He further noted that voters make a nuanced differentiation between private character and public character. Reed further notes, “I am not voting for this person to be my daughter’s husband or pastor.” Trump is explicitly honest that he is not concerned with religion or Christianity lived out in personal character and conduct in private. On “Fox and Friends,” Trump was asked about his relationship with God and his prayer life. Trump responded, “I do very well with the evangelicals. I love evangelicals. And I have more people saying they pray for me. I can’t believe it.”⁸ “I can’t believe it” is an interesting statement and could be interpreted in many ways.⁹ MSNBC host and former Republican House representative, Joe Scarborough replayed Trump’s Fox and Friends interview on “Morning Joe,” mockingly laughed and said, “I mean, seriously, just go to church once, right?” Scarborough continued, “It’s just beyond parody, it’s just sad.”¹⁰ Parody? Beyond parody? Sad? Perhaps critics suggestion that Trump is parodying, contradicting, manipulating, instrumentalizing, marketing, and/or profaning Christianity feeds into his political message that the *others* (i.e., liberal and/radical “enemies”) are and have been lying, deceiving, and promoting “fake news.”¹¹ For many, Trump does not represent anything that warrants the support of Christian evangelicals. Critics evaluate Trump (and his supporters) through a criterion of religion based on the so-called personal conduct in the sphere of life. Yet, my main point for focusing on the critiques against white Christian support is that it reflects a misunderstanding of Christianity in American politics and history.¹² To say that Trump’s private conduct or personal life does not align with white Christianity misses what “American” religion is and does in political culture. Or, that Trump’s personal life is not aligned with the espoused beliefs, morals, and rituals of Christians who support him. Such critiques partly recycle a modern view of religion that disentangles it from political power and self-interest.¹³ What I am suggesting is that Christian support of Trump challenges us to reconsider our conventional criteria for

identifying (or quantifying) religion and, *Christianity*, in particular. Evangelical Christianity is not purely bound by what one does in their personal or private life.¹⁴

What I am suggesting is that he and his supporters represent and practice a certain kind of Christianity. What Trumpism unveils is that evangelical Christianity is a political project that is not restricted to strict conventional markers of belief in God, prayer, church attendance, devotion, or morals in private (or “the heart”). I argue that evangelical Christianity is not just a political project, but it is a racial project. Trump exposes a kind of Christianity that is overtly and excessively public—with cameras, news stations, social media platforms, t-shirts, and pictures.¹⁵ Christianity is made real through, what Sally Promey calls, “public display” and political performance.¹⁶ An article on Richard Spencer further illuminates what I am arguing that Christian conservatism is quantified by public and political criterion, and not private or personal sphere of belief, daily devotion/ritual, values, or conduct.

In the 2017 June edition of *The Atlantic*, there was an article on alt-right organizer Richard Spencer.¹⁷ Self-identifying as an atheist, Spencer took issue with Christopher Hitchens’ dismissal of Christianity on scientific and rational grounds, consequently overlooking its real import in Western civilization. For Spencer, Christianity was not about supernatural beliefs, private devotion, private character/values, and rituals. In fact, he did not like what evangelicals did with Christianity. Like evangelicals, he felt that Christopher Hitchens divorced Christianity from its historical and political import in Western civilization. According to the article, Christianity binds people together in a common political and racial project of establishing a white ethnostate that Spencer was attempting to repurpose in the contemporary U.S. and Western Europe. Christianity was a political mechanism to “awaken white ethnic pride and instituting governmental politics.”¹⁸ Christianity projects the white ethnostate rooted in a racial heritage.¹⁹ Spencer’s framework best captures part of my claim that Christianity is a white state project. For his supporters, Trump is primed to establish this white and Christian statism through the judicial and legislative branches. The 2024 elections will further amplify desires to establish white Christian statism.²⁰

This racial and political project of Christian state governance has reared its ugly head in recent polices and debates around reproductive health. Reproductive health is one of the top election issues after the fall of Roe vs. Wade. It is poised to have an impact on the religious and political landscape. Both Biden and Trump are on a collision course. Despite his rebuttal against the Arizona Supreme Court’s near total abortion ban, Trump told Danbury Institute, a conservative Christian organization, that he will stand side by side with them in calling for the eradication of abortion. In an apocalyptic tone, President Joe Biden has framed reproduction controversy as a “ballot for democracy,” pointing towards the end of individual liberties and protections. Nevertheless, the political project of white Christianity is engineered through a network of federal and

state courts, law firms, and private corporations that eventually led to the decision that overturned Roe v. Wade. The networks present a different criterion for Christianity that is solidified by statist orientation. Overthrowing Roe v. Wade opened the floodgates to punitive “state rights” policies in Texas, Florida, Louisiana, Alabama, and other states that will jeopardize the health of women in the country.

America has a long history of anti-Catholicism. Interestingly, many of the Supreme Court justices are conservative Catholics working with conservative Protestants. Some Justices have used the law to insatiate Christian governance in the control and regulation of women’s bodies in line with their private beliefs and morality. What is more interesting is the Alabama court decision IVF case. Alabama court justice (and reportedly affiliated with New Apostolic Reformation), Tom Park used Jeremiah 29:1 to bolster his opinion that frozen embryos are legally considered children. He said the true nature of the Alabama law requires the state to protect the “sanctity of life.” Sanctity framed life as a gift from God. Park asserted, “human life cannot be wrongfully destroyed without incurring the wrath of a holy God.” So, managing reproduction has been a key feature of nationalism, albeit across the divide in the history of U.S. Christianity and biopolitics. And this managing reproduction was partly a Christian and secular project. Religion historian Samira Mehta shows how today’s anti-abortion decision by the Supreme Court was rooted in the history of the “national myth... tied to the maintenance of strict gender roles, with America’s strength embedded in the White traditional family headed by a patriarch.”²¹ Reproductive justice activists have drawn our attention to the ways in which the white traditional family is religious and political project.

There is much pushback from the electorate on state and local levels. In a defeat to Republicans, Ohio voters approved a constitutional amendment to ensure access to abortion and other forms of reproductive health. It is not certain how this will translate to the national presidential elections. Again, Samira Mehta and Lauren M. Thompson rightly argue that there is not one religious view of abortion and reproduction in general. Tax funded courts and legislatures are out of step with nearly two-thirds of Americans (64%) who say abortion should be legal. According to a 2024 PPRRI poll, “most people of faith support abortion legally.” Additionally, many Christians (like Catholics) support IVF.²² Yet, the religious organizations are stubbornly committed to establishing this white ethno state to regulate gender roles. Thus, Southern Baptist Convention ruled against IVF (coupled with their ban on women pastors and purity culture) have further drove a wedge between the evangelical denomination and younger white women. According to *New York Times* article, younger white women, especially millennials and Gen-Zers are leaving the SBC, churches, and evangelicalism in general.²³

The debate around reproductive health ignores the plight of Black women. The political project of white Christian statism has detrimental consequences on Black women in the history

of reproduction in the U.S. Black women are three times more likely to die from a pregnancy-related cause of death than white women. As scholar Dorothy Roberts explains, Black mothers are more likely to be criminalized in reproductive and health services than their white counterparts.²⁴ The criminalization was extended in Louisiana law that tried to reclassify “abortion” and health pills to the category of substance abuse. Child services, hospitals, schools participate in the criminalization project. I am currently working on a book on a history of black religion and public health campaigns in the early 20th century. I recently wrote part of the book on state midwifery programs for black religion in Florida, in the early 1930s and 1940s. And it is not too much different in the 20th as in the 21st century as it related to the high mortality rates and punitive reproduction laws and codes faced by Black women as a group. Of course, we could go back to enslavement as a form of managing reproduction. In 1994, the Black Women’s Caucus formed and coined the term, Reproductive Justice, in Chicago after the International Conference on Population and Development conference in Cairo, Egypt to contest the liberal pro-choice discourse, current black feminist and reproductive groups have expanded “reproduction” to the “right to have a child, and the right to raise your children.”²⁵ The rise of midwives and birthing doulas coupled with mutual aid societies in local communities might be a way rethink how religion and politics are measured, covered, and quantified in U.S.

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd

Northwestern University

“Decolonizing Judaism: Religion, Politics, and the War in Gaza”

In the spring of 2024 student protestors across the country called for their universities to divest from the state of Israel and for an end to the horrific violence in Gaza. Many universities and colleges, including Northwestern University where I work, were gripped by fear of police violence. Some, such as Northwestern, navigated rocky waters toward a nonviolent resolution to (at least some of) the students’ demands. Other campuses were less fortunate, and violence against the protestors was widespread. This essay brings together my experience supporting the student protestors in Evanston with my recent research and writing on U.S.-Israeli relations.

I recently finished a book about politics, religion, borders and borderlessness in and beyond the United States.¹ One of my chapters focuses on the borderless relations between the United States and the state of Israel. I use the phrase “AmericaIsrael”—one word, no hyphen—to capture this entity. AmericaIsrael does not fit neatly into the Westphalian system of international order, which is comprised of states. It is a powerful supra-sovereign formation invoking racialization, abjection, philosemitism and antisemitism. It taps into shared U.S. and Israeli fantasies of military prowess, Holy Land fascination, and myths of civilizational triumph over theocracy and despotism. It celebrates the frontier mentalities of Israel and the United States. It speaks of the Promised Land and the Golden Land. It elides U.S. and Israeli military debacles from Wounded Knee to Vietnam to Afghanistan, to the Sabra and Shatila massacre and the death and starvation in Gaza. It mobilizes all forms of power to serve its ends. To name one, Julia Bacha, director of the film *Boycott*, said that, “in America today, if you want to keep your public contract, you need to sign a pledge promising that you’re not going to boycott Israel.”² Between 2015 and 2021, 33 U.S. states passed legislation or executive orders allowing for the punishment of individuals or companies that express support for boycotting Israel.

AmericaIsrael has an even darker side. Beyond crushing free expression, it trades in a longstanding unwillingness to incorporate an inassimilable racial and religious other. It is about attraction, repulsion, hierarchy and dominance. This face of AmericaIsrael conjures an attempt to assimilate an unassimilable sacred-object-Jew within a white Christian nation. It quietly draws on a powerful strain of antisemitism that conceives of Jewish lives as bare (un-Christian) lives. White power advocates tapped into this when they screamed “Jews will not replace us” in Charlottesville in 2017.³ This strain of antisemitism was documented in a 2024 *New York Times* exposé on the Republican mainstreaming of anti-Jewish racism.⁴ The affective architecture of the U.S.

commitment to the state of Israel is quietly saturated with racialized bigotry. Trump and his allies have tapped this vein. It is at the core of what dissenters to U.S. support for Israel are dissenting from. Like many decolonizing movements, it is about religion, race, and a challenge to white supremacy.

Even in the face of such realities, the U.S. political establishment continues to insist that support for Israel is support for democracy and freedom. One does not have to be Christian, Jewish or a white supremacist to support Israel. One can be a patriotic American, a supporter of military power and prowess, or just a fan of the Wild West. One can be an antisemitic pro-Zionist. Crucial to keeping this consensus afloat across diverse constituencies is the collapse of support for Judaism, support for freedom and democracy, and support for Israel. Israel is presented as the natural repository of Judaism and Jewishness. Jewishness, and Jews, are externalized, while also being provisionally included. Today, however, deep cracks in this consensus are emerging. What can these dissenters teach us about religion and politics?

Among the campus protestors are many non- and anti-Zionist Jews who, in alliance with anti-racist and decolonial activists of all backgrounds, are calling not only for a reassessment of unwavering U.S. support for Israel but a wholesale reinvention of political order in Israel/Palestine. While criticism of the Israeli government and calls for a post-Netanyahu era have become the domain of mainstream politicians such as Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer,⁵ these new dissenters are demanding the wholesale dismantlement of the infrastructure of Israeli ethnonationalism, including the moral legitimacy and political viability of its claim to institutionalized Jewish supremacy. The protestors go beyond the claim by critics like Peter Beinart that in the U.S. liberalism and Zionism are increasingly viewed as incompatible. That may be the case, but liberal individualism is not, and never was, the metric by which Zionism is assessed by these protestors. Liberalism is insufficient to the scale of the collective task at hand, which, for a start, and as Beinart notes, is “to move away from [Israel’s] existential commitment to Jewish supremacy in the name of human dignity and justice.”⁶ The protestors are demanding multiracial democracy for all residents of Palestine, including Jews, from the Jordan river to the Mediterranean Sea.

They are also calling for the decolonization of American Judaism. The collapse of American Judaism into support for the state of Israel (for an illustration see the powerful documentary film *Israelism*)⁷ is no longer sustainable for many members of the protestors’ generation. To emancipate Judaism from Zionism will involve decoupling American Judaism(s) from U.S. support for the Israeli national project, thereby creating

space for dissenting Judaisms to flourish, or at least to be something other than suspect, on the margins, and beyond the pale. As Shaul Magid points out, “if we’re to honor the way ‘actual Jews do Jewishness,’ then we’d have to honor it even when they do Jewishness in a non-Zionist, or even anti-Zionist, way.”⁸ Support for Jewish individuals and communities in some moments may entail *opposing* certain forms of political Zionism: examples include the expulsion of Iraqi Jews after the creation of Israel, the Israeli government’s limitations on non-orthodox forms of Judaism within Israel, and, needless to say, the mass killing in Gaza.

These ongoing shifts in public discourse and opinion also implicate American religious freedom. To the extent that the field of (legitimate) religious and political possibility for Jewishness in the United States is no longer completely occupied by Zionism, it shifts the terms of religious freedom. While in the past “religious freedom” for pro-Israel Jews has been safeguarded, that has not been the case for those who calling for a different political order in Palestine. They have not been seen as exercising their religious freedom but have been cast out as heretics, terrorists and antisemites.

Today these voices are no longer on the fringes in the United States. Efforts to silence them are proving increasingly difficult. They are at the center of many campus protests and are receiving serious consideration across American society. As one student protestor told a reporter for our local ABC affiliate, “This encampment is the time at Northwestern where I’ve felt most connected to and supported in my faith at Northwestern because it has given me the space to be both Jewish and anti-Zionist.”⁹ This position is breaking through the threshold of public and political legibility, if not yet legitimacy, in the United States. It will be difficult to turn back.

Advanced Graduate Student Presentations

*During this session advanced graduate students will give 3–4 minute mini-presentations describing their research projects and the importance and impact of their work on American religion. This session is sponsored by the Center's journal, *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*. The journal seeks to publish work that revises or considerably extends our understanding of the relationship between religion and other aspects of American culture, and presentations will focus on that goal.*

Gerard Jameson

Temple University

“Resistance and Reimagination: Comparing Past and Present Black American New Religious Movements Across 150 Years”

I have no idea what happens in “Games of Thrones.” I’ve never seen a full episode of “The Wire” or “Veep”. People often look at me with a sense of bewilderment, as if I, myself, am a foreigner entity. It’s not that I have never wanted to see these shows. For much of my time as a graduate student I’ve paid my way through my programs which left me very little money for cable. And premium channels? Forget about it. In today’s world of a-la-carte streaming services it’s much easier to decide which networks one wants to subscribe to but in order to get the shows one is really interested in, the prospect of having to purchase two or more of these bundles is both real and potentially just as expensive as a cable service if not more. My solution to the lack of access to the content I wanted was to substitute them for what was readily available (and free!). With the ubiquity of social media and the abundance of content creators, viewing entertaining and engaging content for free has never been this easy. For example, I can go to daily motion.com or YouTube to see just about any show I want. There are obvious limitations but not enough that it hinders my ability to see the content I want. Of all the social media platforms YouTube has been my go-to due to its never-ending catalog of videos that show scenes and recaps of popular movies and shows, news, and origin content. I shouldn’t admit that the sheer volume of content has drawn me into spaces of non-productivity but my doing so illustrates the dangers that these free forms of entertainment pose. My dissertation project highlights some of the dangers of social media, particularly as it relates to Black New Religious Movements (BNRMs). In both its ubiquity and affordability, which is in stark contrast to the ever-increasing price of consuming content, people can consume as much or as little of the content that interests them. This is fertile ground for BNRM leaders to draw from. My project looks at the role social media has played and continues to play in the recruitment and propagation of New Religious Movements, especially in the black community. One such group is known by the name Carbonation.

This project compares BNRMs in the United States from 1874-2024. The definition of new religious movements has been widely debated, and centered on Religious Studies and Sociological perspectives, at the exclusion of Black Studies. A more inclusive definition for BNRMs provides an opportunity to explore both religious and racial identity. Whether they evolved from Abrahamic faith traditions (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) or the syncretism of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and African Traditional Religions, these groups acted to

resist oppression. Many Black Americans in the 20th and 21st centuries embraced James Cone’s (1938-2018) Black Liberation Theology to achieve spiritual and social liberation in the present, as opposed to the distant future, even if unknowingly. Similar to BNRMs that form in real life, those that form on social media also share the same features of Black Liberation Theology, with additional common attributes of George Ritzer’s (1940 -) McDonalidization concept. This project used the descriptive encyclopedic comparison approach to set the goal, mode, scale and scope; as well as select comparands, describe the data, juxtapose, re-describe, rectify, and form new definitions, theologies, and theories. Based on these comparisons, I posit: 1) The definition of Black American new religious movements needs to include a Black Studies perspective; 2) Although Black Liberation Theology emerged from Christians, its empowerment components through self-definition, self-affirmation, and self-determination extends to BNRMs that stem from Islam and Judaism; and 3) Social media platforms facilitate McDonalidization of BNRMs through efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. Efficiency dictates that every aspect of online Black American new religious movements is geared toward the minimization of time, including spreading the doctrine and followers going from ignorant to informed in an instant. Calculability leads virtual followers of BNRMs to believe they are getting a large amount of religious knowledge for free or very little money through electronic contributions. Predictability guarantees that no matter where and when an adherent accesses the online material, they will receive the same messaging every time when interacting with BNRMs online. Control ensures standardized behaviors for all adherents, both those in physical proximity to we the spiritual guide and the followers who watch through social media. Collectively, these seven common features with past and present groups can help to identify BNRMs that originate on social media in the future.

Humberto Perez

Florida State University

“Wiccan Great Awakening: The Maturation and Development of Wicca as a Uniquely American Religion”

In appreciating the complex dynamics of Wicca as it has developed in the U.S., it is necessary to recognize that, despite their insistence to define themselves against Christianity, there, in fact, is evidence indicating that Wiccans and Pagans in the United States are heavily influenced in their beliefs and practices by mainline Protestant Christianity. The majority of people who self-identify as Wiccan or Pagan in America converted to the religion, with the vast majority of those coming from a Christian background. This is understandable, considering that the population of the United States is predominantly Christian. It should come as no surprise then that these folks would bring with them some form of religious baggage from their original Christian upbringing. This dissertation will argue that American evangelical Christianity directly influences how the Wiccan religion has developed in the United States.

My investigation will focus on several key areas. I will explore the ways in which Wiccans share a common emotional language with evangelical Christianity in their understanding of their relationship with divinity. Central to this project is an analysis of the various ways both groups appeal to supernatural forces represented by prayer and magic, for example - to try to affect change in the world at large. Additionally, much like Wiccans use a Christian emotional vocabulary to describe their relationship and understanding of deity, Wiccans model religious community based on how Christian organizations function. Finally, this dissertation will explore how the Wiccan religion has grown beyond a Christian understanding of the world as it continues to mature as a tradition and establish itself as a distinctly American religion.

In order to successfully complete my study, I intend to engage with various archival sources in both Christianity and Wicca. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature, I aim to establish a general history of Wicca in the United States and to show how the religion adapts itself to align with counterculture movements in the United States. I also intend to conduct surveys and interviews of the Wiccan community to better understand the emotional language used in their rituals and how they perceive their relationship with the divine. I will collect ethnographic data to support the evidence gathered in the literature review and to show, in their own words, how American Wiccans use an emotional vocabulary similar to that used by Evangelical Christians in the United States.

The narrative arc of this project is to tell the story of how Wicca is imported into the United States, is incubated and developed in this culture where Christian beliefs and religiosity dominate,

and eventually matures beyond a Christian understanding of what it means to be religious to cultivate its own religious identity. My project will also show how, as Wicca grows and matures as a religion, it pushes back against these inherited Christian perspectives and forms its own sense of religious identity that clashes against the dominant Protestant Christian ideology of Christianity in the United States, even as it carries forward elements of Protestant religious practice. In the same way that evangelical Christianity adapted to meet the needs of life in the New World, Wicca has evolved in form and practice from its origins in England to address the requirements of its American audience and become a genuinely American religion. What this dissertation will show is that Wicca has embraced its status as an outsider religion and become a haven for “outsiders” in American society to find a religious home for themselves that is accepting of them for who they are rather than forcing them to conform to long-held dogmas, gender codes, and religious ideologies. Wicca, as a minority and alternative community, continuously has adapted itself to meet the needs of the immediate community rather than demanding the community adapt itself to what might be imagined as a canonical Wicca.

Avalon Jade Theisen

Arizona State University

“Religious Environmental Nonprofit Organizations in the United States”

Growing up, I was fascinated by how differently people interpret the same world. I also really enjoyed the outdoors. So, I asked my parents to take me to a lot of temples and churches, as well as to parks, environmental classes, and volunteering opportunities. These childhood interests and experiences grew and eventually led me to my current PhD program in religious studies at Arizona State University, where I research religious environmental nonprofit organizations in the United States.

For the past 3 years, I have studied the Catholic Climate Covenant, Green Muslims, Earth Sangha, EcoSikh, and Adamah to argue that religion, regardless of specific faith, can motivate and be a thought partner for sustainability, as seen in environmental nonprofit organizations. I have chosen these organizations due to their comparability in working in the same geographic area of the eastern United States, existing for a minimum of ten years, and having monthly events. I seek to understand how the formalization of religious environmentalism into nonprofit organizations affects members' motivation and impact, as well as to delve into what aspects of conservation work converge and diverge across these nonprofits. My case studies come from a range of traditions: Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Judaism. By analyzing organizations associated with a variety of Abrahamic and Indic traditions, I am demonstrating that religious beliefs and practices do not have to belong to the majority religious tradition in a given culture in order to be effective.

My evidence so far has included scholarly articles, news articles, and academic book chapters to provide outsider perspectives. I have also consulted these nonprofits' websites, including their various resources, and social media to understand their own perspectives. Currently in my comprehensive examination phase, I am learning more contextual knowledge to aid my study.

After IRB training in spring 2025, I will be able to conduct fieldwork which will center on ethnographic participant observation. I will travel to the headquarters of the religious environmental nonprofit organizations I study in Washington, D.C., Maryland, Virginia, and New York. Conducting semi-structured interviews with both paid staff and volunteers, observing their efforts, and volunteering alongside them, I will gain greater insight into these religious environmental nonprofit organizations. I will also conduct follow-up visits to understand how the organizations might have changed since my initial visits.

My dissertation work is important for extending our understanding of religion in American culture in a number of ways. The United States is the most religiously-diverse country in the world. Religion informs people's worldviews, lifestyles, and values. The presence of religiously-influenced environmental nonprofits demonstrates the importance of sustainability to many religious adherents. Additionally, as everyone relies on functioning ecosystems for air to breathe, water to drink, food to eat, and other basic necessities, conservation work is essential for the continuation of human life and thus the survival of religion as we know it. The intersection of religion and sustainability is important as it presents an essential part of the human condition.

Nicholas Covaleski

Boston University

“Frontiers in American Religion: Myth, Technology, and the Making of Frontier Communitas”

The frontier myth—according to which the conquering of new frontiers is pivotal to national progress—is one of the most pervasive myths in United States history. The religious significance of this myth in US culture, however, has been neglected by historians of North American religion. Numerous critics, ranging from communication scholars to political theorists to historians of the American West, have exhaustively documented the ideological functions of frontier mythology. This project does not challenge those critiques; indeed, it only reaffirms them. However, it does suggest that myths are far more than mechanisms for camouflaging political and economic—which is to say, material—policies and agendas. Myths are also about experience, and more specifically, sacred experiences of community and transcendence. *Frontiers in American Religion* argues that frontier mythology derives much of its power in US culture due to its religious function, which is to say that the myth of the frontier serves as a sacred history that relates the original creation of the nation-state and “the American people” through the acts of civilizing heroes.

It further argues that the ritual repetition of this mythical archetype—that is, crossing new frontiers—re-actualizes the initial act of creation and stimulates collective rebirth and regeneration. Finally, this study highlights how modern technologies—from televisions to space shuttles to Chevy vans to virtual reality headsets—have been essential to enabling the ritual repetition of the frontier-mythical archetype throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. If we take seriously, then, the religious dimensions of frontier mythology, we see that it not only continues to influence religious life in the US, but that it also directs our attention to sites where religion was thought to not have much life at all—sites like California sterilization clinics, Cape Canaveral Air Force Station, and Silicon Valley startups. I show that the frontier myth is a map that, if tracked with the right set of tools, helps us capture religion’s operations in places far flung from churches, sermons, and holy texts. Restated, it helps us chart largely uncharted territories of US religious history—the frontiers in American religion.

Sarah Hedgecock

Columbia University

“Living Memory: Nostalgia and Evangelical Girlhood from the Cold War to the Present”

“**A** girl is a marvelous thing!” reads a 1977 pamphlet promoting the Pioneer Girls, a sort of evangelical alternative to the Girl Scouts. “She’s a bundle of right-now enrichment for all those whose lives she touches. She’s a challenge. She’s a wonder. She’s pain and disappointment. But most of all—she’s God’s creation.”¹ These were merely some of the characteristics of girlhood that the organization promoted over the years. Throughout the history of the Pioneer Girls, participants were taught to look toward the future and also taught not to rush toward womanhood, a future identity with different characteristics. They were also, implicitly, understood as American and white.

Meanwhile, in the present, Lily, a fourteen-year-old white girl, explained what made Christian girls distinctive: “I’m thinking about it from a biblical perspective. Like that we’re supposed to have gentle spirits, we’re supposed to provide and give life. But at the same time, be warriors for the Lord.”² In the absence of Biblical practices specifically for girls, Lily looked to ones for women, working to learn them now so she would be prepared for womanhood later. Nostalgia for biblical times, looking forward to womanhood and backward to childhood, individual relationships with God and with others in their communities—these are all hallmarks of white evangelical girlhood. But these are just two snapshots from a longer history of nostalgia and girlhood in white American evangelicalism dating back to the middle of the 20th century.

From the beginnings of so-called neo-evangelicalism in the 1940s, white American evangelicals have looked to the past—the biblical past, an idealized past Christian America, the eternal past of childhood—as a model for how to be. My work argues for the centrality of relationality and nostalgia to white American evangelicalism, and furthermore claims that girlhood is an ideal place to see them. Nostalgia is an affective practice, and here it comes out as a bringing back of certain (alleged) practices from the past to teach children to create a better future.

Nostalgia thus works as an engine for relationality, binding a community through a shared affective practice, and for the transmission of evangelicalism to its next generation.

My research traces the ways nostalgia, and in particular a pedagogy of nostalgia, has been employed throughout the recent history of this religious tradition. My work looks at how organizations and campaigns like Young Life, Pioneer Girls, Christian summer camp, and True Love Waits employed nostalgia to educate girls in their care, as well as the nostalgic-pedagogical uses of social media in the present. My research also shows that the meaning of girlhood in evangelicalism has shifted, from a discrete gendered and aged experience to a preparation period for Christian womanhood to an expansive category incorporating any young woman who has not yet married. Interviews with current evangelical girls shine light on how—or even whether—these shifting meanings have been incorporated into girls’ own identities. What I have learned is that white evangelical girls throughout history are always taught how to perform their gender in a specifically relational, nostalgic way, passing on biblical womanhood to the next generation, who will no doubt transform it again.

Izzak Novak

Northwestern University

**“[Not Going Hunting] Feels Like Not Calling My Mother’:
An Ethnography of the Religious, Gendered, and Political
Valences of White Settler Hunting in the US”**

Commenting on the social media site Reddit’s hunting forum, a user remarked “I may not believe in a god or gods, but this green and blue speck of cosmic life dust floating around the vast uninhabitable expanse of space is as close to a god as you can get. Grabbing my gun and heading out the door knowing there’s a chance tomorrow there will be one less creature on this earth and I’m eating it for survival feels like I’m carrying on a ritual as old as life itself. I actually get depressed when I go long periods of time without isolation in nature, feels like not calling my mother.”

Though many hunters on and off Reddit disavow ties to religion as such, mirroring broader themes in the study of American religion, we see here the unruly ways religion surfaces in US culture. For hunters like this one, the practice imbricates them within an elaborate though supposedly secularized cosmology that links life and death, intimacy and violence, isolation and community, and more. For other hunters, hunting fulfills biblical imperatives to maintain stewardly dominion over life on Earth, a sentiment shared at church dinners inaugurating hunting season. For still others, the hours-long silence of the hunt is filled with conversations with God and the deceased. Indeed, the ways hunters narrate the religious valences and experience of hunting, even when they refuse to name it that way, implicate them in long and disparate strands of US religious history, from religion-in-nature to Muscular Christianity. But my project argues that hunting is important for far more than its religious significances alone, uncovering the imbrications of religion, gender, the family, violence, gun culture, and the state via a central nexus, white settler hunting, and rejecting the notion that domains of culture are truly discrete.

As a vehicle for homosocial bonding and generational knowledge transfer, as the means to feed one’s family, as the occasion to consider the role violence plays in one’s foodways, as the axis mundi where gods and lost loved ones break into mundane reality, as the foil against which bad gun ownership is constructed, or as the site of intimate relation with state actors who meticulously legislate how, where, when, and how much to hunt, hunting thrusts its practitioners into relationships with living and dead humans, with other animals and “nature,” with states, and with immaterial non-human actors. The practice is thus central in actualizing the intersubjectivities of hunters and those they live in relationship with.

My dissertation, employing digital ethnography and in-person participant observation and interviews with hunters in Iowa reveals hunting as a particularly illustrative axis at which domains of culture show their blurredness, offering religious studies and other allied disciplines a rejoinder against dividing the world up too neatly and challenging our preconceived notions, our expectations, and even our aloofness to the violence we bring into the world.

Gabriel Chazan

University of Wisconsin, Madison

“Devotional Aestheticism: Steinberg, Sontag, Koestenbaum and the Question of a Queer Jewish Art History”

In her memoir, historian of Yiddish literature Ruth Wisse recalls a decadent welcome dinner for her then-newly endowed post at Harvard. Wisse and an art historian friend “found ourselves talking...about the father of her friend and fellow art historian Leo Steinberg...Didn’t I know about Isaac Steinberg, who was associated with Yiddish?”¹ Isaac spent years establishing the Freeland League, a central force in the Jewish territorialist movement, aiming for small Jewish settlements in Australia amidst the rising tide of antisemitism in Russia and Germany. Wisse “certainly did know about I.N. Shteynberg... but it had not occurred to me to associate him with the Leo Steinberg whose writings on art I had read alongside those of his New York counterparts Meyer Schapiro and Harold Rosenberg. Were Shteynberg and Steinberg truly father and son?”² Wisse takes the separation between Leo and Isaac to be about “leaving Judaism for art.”³ This dissertation, however, takes as a focus something Wisse mostly suggests: I argue that the relationship of Shteynberg and Steinberg is partly one of translation from Yiddish to English and from one form of Judaism to another.

Steinberg worked as the translator from Yiddish of Sholem Asch’s *Mary* (1949), a controversial Jewish retelling of the story of Christ.⁴ Steinberg himself later took up a rarely discussed aspect of Christian painting in *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*. This argument was first published as an article in 1983, amidst the AIDS crisis and culture wars around visual depictions of Christian imagery and erotics.⁵ Just as Asch wrote about Christ in relation to thick Yiddish culture, Steinberg focused on elements of paintings of Christ that were rarely discussed and could therefore destabilize prior conceptions.

Within Protestant American secular culture, it is easy to miss Jewishness and Judaism even when it is right there—just as the erotics of the Renaissance depictions of Christ were rarely explicitly discussed before Steinberg. Toward deeper understanding of art history, it is essential to recognize Jewishness and Judaism without assimilation to norms of American society’s ideas of private practiced religion and belief. By not assuming what forms a Jewish art history might take, more becomes possible to see. I do this through case studies of three writers on art who intersect the AIDS crisis and culture wars: Steinberg, Wayne Koestenbaum and Susan Sontag. All three are read thickly in their thinking on sexuality, aesthetics and religion in American culture. I find the proximity of “Shteynberg and Steinberg” ultimately aids a fuller understanding of the historiography of art history and expands the consideration of the relationship of Judaism to a seemingly secular world of American culture.

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“Drawing out the Word: Remediating the Bible Through Comics”

Noah Van Sciver’s *Joseph Smith and The Mormons* is a 2022 graphic novel about the founder and origins of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In a recent visit to my religion and pop culture class, Van Sciver described the book’s creation as “the hardest thing [he’s] ever done and will ever do.” Although written for a general audience, the comic was born out of the artist’s attempt to examine his own complicated relationship to the church, which fell into disarray as a teen after his parents’ divorce. The making process included drawing, inking, and writing the script, but also reading primary texts, visiting archives, and photographing sacred LDS sites and objects across America. He hoped that making the comic could heal the fracture in his family and perhaps even return him to the religion of his boyhood. The author’s notes at the end of the book signal his urgency: “I needed to draw this book because I needed to know who Joseph Smith was. I could read everything written about him and do endless research, but that wasn’t enough for me. I needed to be him, to inhabit the man through my art and act out the events of his life with my pen.”

How contemporary cartoonists inhabit the characters and act out the events of American religious history through their creative processes is central to my research. Through ethnographic, book historical, and visual methods, each of my case studies reveal the creative and devotional labor that infuses the work of cartoonists using the medium to rewrite, reimagine, and reflect on their religious upbringings and the sacred texts that formed them. The act of drawing out American religions and the Bible with a pen, I argue, produces more than a historical narrative. The physical and emotional labor behind the work is also evidence of an autobiographical process, one that negotiates how and why *making* matters in the narration of self and community. These comics created by lapsed and practicing Catholics, Protestants, and self-proclaimed “Unorthodox” Christians are important sites for tracking personal and institutional histories and, more importantly, how these narratives transform when told through material objects *and* the material practices of their makers. The autobiographical element of each comic shows how the Bible is not just a text whose words and cultural authority work on individuals, but that it is also a text that is worked upon by those who read and rewrite it within the context of their own lives.