

## Forum

As a regular feature of *Religion and American Culture*, the editors invite scholars to comment from different perspectives on an issue or problem central to the study of religion in its American context. The FORUM format is designed to foster the cross-disciplinary study of religion and American culture and to bring to the readers of the journal the latest thoughts of scholars on timely, substantial topics. Contributors to the FORUM are asked to present brief essays or “thought pieces” instead of carefully documented articles.

This FORUM is a little different from those in the past. First, we decided to run a series of essays on a single topic through two issues in 2019. Second, we asked Ari Y. Kelman and Kathryn Lofton to serve as guest curators, assembling authors from different disciplines and perspectives to engage with a remarkable text from five decades ago, but with themes that still resonate today.

### The Religious Situation, 1968 (Part 2)

This FORUM uses a volume published in 1968 to reflect on the religious situation today. *The Religious Situation: 1968* announced its intention to be “The First in a Series of Annual Volumes.” As it turned out, only one additional volume was published, in 1969. The 1968 collection reprints famous essays (such as “Civil Religion in America” by Robert Bellah and “Religion as a Cultural System” by Clifford Geertz) and issues for the first time many more, including reports on South India and Japanese peace movements; reflections on idolatry, secularization, and secularity; and updates on Jews, Catholics, and Mormons. There is not a single female author; only one author is a person of color. Every essay speaks with enormous diagnostic confidence about its designated subject and with differing sensitivities toward the significant cultural and political tumult that have come to be associated with 1968. There is not a lot of mirth or irony.

In other words: This is a volume very much of its time. Any historian would recognize many contextual elements that indicate its

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specific moment. Authors generally agree that church attendance is on the decline. Contributors see Vatican II as an inevitable liberalization of the Catholic Church. The Protestants think ecumenism is on the rise. Cold War fears about Russia and the Global South unite several essays, and Cold War glee about American exceptionalism define the tenor of optimism about religious freedom throughout. Nobody mentions the 1965 Immigration Act, and none of the authors sense the Silent Majority that will soon fuel the rise of evangelical voices in the public sphere.

So why return to this volume? Because its authors seek to describe their religious moment and diagnose what their futures might be. This exercise is something of a scholarly ritual, and one we thought it valuable to revisit, with the perspective of fifty years since the original publication. What emerged was less a reflection on “the religious situation” in 1968, and more of a collection of perspectives on how things have changed and how they have not.

We asked scholars to reflect on a specific essay, and answer two questions: Does the essay’s argument stand the test of time? What do you think is the status of its subject today? We don’t assume anyone has read all of the essays in *The Religious Situation: 1968*, so we encouraged the contributors to be inspired by, but not defined by, those original essays. We hope readers can use these essays to think about the status of certain perennial subjects in the study of American religion.

## The Abortion Debate

Irene Oh

When Ralph Potter penned “The Abortion Debate” for publication in the late 1960s, *Roe v. Wade* (1973) had not yet been argued, and the Supreme Court had just decided, in *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965), that married couples had a right to privacy that allowed them to use birth control without fear of criminal punishment. Abortion, even when both husband and wife agreed it would be best, was still illegal except when necessary to save the life of the mother. Birth control pills had been approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 1960, and enabled women to exercise an unprecedented degree of autonomy over their ability to get pregnant. Prior to the advent of the birth control pill, women had either to rely on their male partners to use condoms properly, or to resort to

unreliable practices such as the rhythm method to avoid pregnancy. Once pregnant, however, women had no choice but to remain pregnant or to seek an illegal abortion. The 1960s marked a time when women were just beginning to exert both legal and medical control over whether or not they would become pregnant and, by extension, whether they would become mothers.

It is during this period of rapid and turbulent change that Potter confronts the confusion among Protestant churches regarding their positions on abortion. Potter bemoans the “spirit of the age” that no longer respects life and argues that, except for “the extraordinary case in which life is pitted against life, the church must continue to urge the state to say ‘No’ to abortion.” Quoting from a wide array of scholars, ranging from Karl Barth to the contemporary Catholic legal thinker Eugene Quay, as well as sociological and polling data, Potter comes to this conclusion through the perspective of a Protestant theologian who takes seriously the demands of a secular state. Although I appreciate the careful consideration that Potter makes in systematically rehearsing various viewpoints and data, I am stunned by the near total absence of women’s actual experiences with pregnancy and, especially, parenting throughout the essay. Reflecting on this piece in 2019, I am dismayed by the presumption of men who believe they ought to be making decisions about women’s bodies and women’s lives without consulting women themselves. Although it would not have been easy for Potter to interview women who had abortions for their perspectives—it was, after all, criminal at the time—there is little attempt even to empathize with the many women who found themselves in this moral quandary.

Since the publication of Ralph Potter’s essay in *The Religious Situation* fifty years ago, much has changed in the landscape of the abortion debate. Supreme Court cases, the availability of abortifacient pills, and cultural shifts with regard to motherhood have altered in fundamental ways the content of discussions on abortion. Perhaps more so than any other factor, major advances in neonatal medicine may help clarify the moral ambiguity surrounding the status of the fetus/unborn child, and, therefore, affect discussions about abortion. Aside from a handful of “miracle” cases, babies born today at approximately twenty-four weeks are considered “viable,” although they require extensive medical intervention to survive. Once a fetus is able to survive outside the mother’s body, it attains the moral status of a child, which has enough clarity such that it does not attract the fierce debate we see concerning abortion, even though childhood is itself not without

moral dilemmas. Up until that twenty-four-week age, however, the moral questions of abortion remain.

As I read the piece—revisiting it for the first time in nearly twenty years since my days studying religion and ethics at the University of Virginia as a doctoral student, when I was neither married nor a mother—I was constantly struck by how much more textured my views toward abortion and parenting have become. I am now happily married with two delightful children, yet I am ever more empathetic toward women who must make the tragic choice to abort and am troubled over the increasingly conservative make-up of a Supreme Court that may well restrict women's ability to obtain a medically safe abortion. Even under the best of circumstances, pregnancy and motherhood are difficult and fundamentally change a woman's life. Forcing a woman to bear a child that she feels she ought not to have is morally hubristic.

Potter does not question the assumption that women should want to prioritize pregnancy and motherhood, which results in a refusal to accept or believe that women, even well-situated ones, may in fact harbor no desire to bear and raise children. After all, if pregnancy and motherhood—especially when married—are, theologically speaking, the “natural” ends of women, then the criminalization of abortion becomes merely a means to steer women toward their ideal selves while at the same time protecting the innocent lives of unborn children. Quay, as quoted by Potter, goes so far as to describe women who find their health endangered as a result of their pregnancy as morally deficient unless they sacrifice themselves for their unborn children. Although Potter himself does not agree that a woman whose life is endangered by a pregnancy ought to give up her life for that of the unborn child, he nonetheless finds a moral guide in Quay, who characterizes a “mother who would sacrifice the life of her unborn child for her own health” as “lacking in something.” Quay even claims that it would “be in the interests of society to sacrifice such a mother rather than the child who might otherwise prove to be normal and decent and an asset.” Not only is Quay's demand that women be selfless to the point of death extreme, but he also hopes that such demands be incorporated into our secular legal system. As Potter observes, fortunately, these demands are not appropriate in a religiously diverse democracy.

Potter seeks to understand whether there are more universal norms of justice that would justify bans against abortion. What Potter finds, by examining polling data, is that the majority of Americans believe that in the cases of a woman's health, rape, or serious birth defect, a woman should be able to obtain an abortion

legally. The large majority of those polled, however, do not agree that poverty and unmarried status are sufficient reasons for legalized abortion. Most perplexing to Potter—and it seems to many of his peers at the time—is why so few Americans believe that married women who do not want any more children should be allowed to obtain a legal abortion, yet “married women . . . constitute the largest segment of the clientele of criminal abortions.”

Potter refers to this beguiling statistic as an “awkward fact” that most moderates avoid. Indeed, why would a married woman, much less a married woman who already has experienced motherhood, want to seek an abortion? Potter concludes that married women who seek abortions must do so out of “nothing more than her own convenience” if, indeed, the vast majority of polled Americans believe that married women should not be able to obtain a legal abortion. For Potter, a married woman’s refusal to accept the risk of pregnancy reveals nothing less than “a stubborn and selfish spirit incompatible with the generous adaptability which must sustain the true family.” In his concluding remarks, Potter laments the “spirit of the age” in which “married women, comfortably placed, who bear neither shame nor poverty” seek abortions “to preserve or extend whatever comfort they have attained.” Such pregnancies, he describes as “awkward, but not tragic.”

Potter, and likely many of his similarly situated contemporaries, seem utterly baffled as to why women, especially married and “comfortably placed” ones, might seek an abortion. There is, in fact, no attempt to question the polling data, to ask why people may have lied to pollsters about abortion, and no serious effort made to understand why married women with children were the most likely to seek abortions. One can see in the choice of language that Potter employs to describe the choice that married women make to have an abortion, that of “awkwardness” and “inconvenience,” the assumption that such decisions weigh lightly on the moral consciousness of women.

It must have been beyond the pale for Potter to imagine that many financially comfortable, married women would find being pregnant and confronted with raising another child so distressful that they would rather seek an illegal, criminal abortion than to proceed with the pregnancy. But the trajectory of the essay, which focuses almost solely on pregnancy itself—and not the way in which having a child profoundly alters the remainder of a woman’s life—indicates vastly different frameworks taken when approaching the moral quandary of abortion. Potter does not find relevant the issue

of how becoming a parent, and a mother in particular, matters morally to the question of abortion. The real-life messiness of motherhood, with delights, yes, but also unrecognized hardships and sacrifices, does not enter into his moral assessment. Rather, the status of the unborn child and the decline of the spirit of generosity are the points of grievance for Potter.

The *New York Times* recently found that public opinion with regard to abortion has not wavered substantially in the last couple of decades. The Pew Research Center also finds relatively stable polling results concerning abortion, with a slight majority (58%) of Americans in favor of legalizing abortion in all or most cases and a substantial minority (37%) opposed in all or most cases. I am quite sure that reports of debilitating exhaustion, postpartum depression, decreased libido, marital strain, financial stress, and all of the lingering physical repercussions of childbirth and child-rearing would not suffice to change the minds of those opposed to abortion. Statistics confirming lower rates of educational achievement for teenage mothers, increased chances of living in poverty for women who have children, and shockingly high rates of maternal mortality in the United States (especially among African-American women) also, I presume, do not sway opinion. Perhaps least persuasive among the quality-of-life issues is the “mommy tracking” that almost universally stunts the career trajectories of professional, highly educated women who have children, which prevents them from attaining leadership positions in business, law, higher education, and other fields.

Such statistics and narratives have, for at least the past two decades, if not longer, failed to persuade Americans to adopt more liberal abortion laws akin to those found in many western European countries. I suspect that the reason for this is not because the statistics and narratives are less than impressive, but rather because of the pervasive and deep cultural expectations about what women should want from their lives and how they should live their lives. According to these cultural norms, women should be heterosexual, married, fertile, and happily willing to bear and raise the children that result from sex with her husband. These norms tell women to prioritize marriage, childbirth, and the work of childcare above ambitions that will take them outside of the domestic sphere, especially while the children are not yet independent. Women are expected to feel grateful for what their husbands provide for them economically; and women are expected to feel psychologically fulfilled by the roles of wife and mother.

The expectations that many Americans hold about women may stem from the belief that marriage and motherhood are natural, in both the biological and theological senses, and therefore women are hardwired to desire these things. Women who refuse marriage and especially children are therefore viewed as “unnatural,” which is why scholars like Quay assert that such women are “lacking.” For Quay and, to a certain extent, Potter, women who seek abortions—especially if they are married and seem ideally situated to have children—are not normal; these women are insufficient, awkward, selfish, and so on and so forth. The backdrop to these expectations, of course, is a romanticized domestic setting with the pains of pregnancy and labor quickly forgotten and motherhood a joyful and uncompromisingly beautiful experience.

Perhaps what is most insidious about such expectations is that women hold themselves to these norms. This may indeed explain why married women would tell pollsters that abortions for married women like themselves *should not* be legalized, even if they themselves were statistically the most likely to have an abortion. This may also explain why, even as women have, during the last fifty years, sought fulfillment outside the domestic sphere, they nonetheless aspire to “have it all”—that is, to try to achieve domestic perfection and maternal bliss while pursuing their career ambitions. That the rise of Martha Stewart and other domestic idols along with the surge in “intensive parenting” parallels the rise of women in the public sphere comes as no surprise; we as a society are reluctant to let go of domestic and maternal ideals of women, even though the costs of such expectations are unrealistic.

I believe that we have come to a point in the abortion debate in the United States where statistics and personal narratives are no longer compelling. We have also reached a point in the debate where semantics regarding the status of the fetus/unborn child also have little sway. Most women who have abortions do not consider the fetus as the moral equivalent of the skin cells we shed with no second thought as to their moral weight. At the same time, many women do not also consider the fetus/unborn child the moral equivalent of already existing persons, including mothers and children. Given the morally ambiguous state of the fetus/unborn child, the only responsible option—assuming the moral and legal autonomy of women—is to leave the decision to abort up to women. The alternative, which Potter and others desire, accepts and condones paternalistic control over women’s bodies during pregnancy and childbirth, and also over the remainder of a woman’s lifetime as a mother.

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## America's Institutions of Faith

**Richard Flory**

Counter to several other chapters in *The Religious Situation: 1968*, to read Edwin S. Gaustad's chapter on religious institutions in America is to experience an optimistic and buoyant view of American religion. Throughout the chapter, Gaustad suggests a tranquil nation where the majority of its citizens maintain a religious identity and regularly attend religious services. Longstanding differences between religious groups are being replaced by cooperation—primarily in the form of denominational mergers—and, in general, religious institutions (and religion more generally) is a positive force for good in society that promotes the unity of the American people.

To be sure, Gaustad shows the religious diversity of the American people, appropriately showing the distribution of the American people across the religious spectrum, with the majority mostly confined to Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and "Other" religious traditions. Indeed, if America was seen as being religiously diverse in 1968, it is much more so today. In 1968, Gaustad's "Other religion" category included everyone other than Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and those with no religion. Thus, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Mormons, Orthodox Christians, and others don't get their own category in 1968 but are part of a total of 1.3 percent of the population. Aggregating all the groups that would have made up Gaustad's "other" category from the 2014 Pew Religious Landscape survey, these groups now total 9 percent of the population. Most significantly, the number of Americans saying they have no religion has increased from 2.7 percent in 1968 to about 25 percent of the population currently.

Beyond the numbers, however, this chapter is particularly interesting in how it frames the ways that the American public is distributed across the religious spectrum and what are essentially the hopes for how religious institutions would move toward a broad (mostly liberal, Protestant) ecumenism in the late 1960s. In this, Gaustad includes a one-quarter-page table showing the many different denominational mergers that had recently taken place, with



the implication that, at least for Protestantism, many diverse groups were (finally) coming together as a mostly united religious tradition.

In what follows, I want to provide five general observations, then suggest three primary shifts in American religion that have taken place since 1968, and, finally, return to Gaustad for some closing thoughts. First, as noted previously, an optimism underlies the entire chapter that suggests that religious institutions (mostly Christian, but others, too) were key institutions in American public life and would stay that way into the future. In this, they provide community, meaning, and the moral underpinnings of the nation.

Second, and related, there is what we might call a “naïve” view of the potential for religious groups to cooperate with each other. To be fair, Gaustad does discuss the tendency of Protestants to split from each other, but, overall, there is an optimism regarding more and more cooperation within and across different Christian traditions. To this end, Gaustad points out the “Consultation on Christian Union,” a National Council of Churches ecumenical effort that would have included ten denominations and “at least 25 million” members in a new denomination. This, of course, did not come to pass. In fact, the opposite has occurred. There has not only been a proliferation of new denominations since 1968, but of independent religious congregations.

Third, the chapter generally misses what most scholars of religion were also missing at that time, and, frankly, missed until the rise of the Religious Right in the late 1970s and early 1980s: the potential of evangelicalism and Pentecostalism as important contributors to social-cultural-political discourse, and to politics in the United States. Interestingly, historian Darren Dochuk, in his 2011 book *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt*, has shown that what became known as the *religious right* had been organizing well before 1968—in, of all places, California—but so far as I know this was not observed as such by scholars at the time.

Fourth, and conspicuous by its absence, is any discussion of how religious institutions might be affected by what was going on in America in 1968, a year that, many have noted, was one of the most turbulent of the twentieth century. As related to religious institutions, there is no discussion of what effect the antiwar movement, hippies, Jesus people, and the like, with the “down with the establishment” mentality that characterized much of the discourse from college students, might have on religious institutions in 1968 or in the years to follow. Particularly interesting in this regard is that Calvary Chapel, the church that was essentially ground zero for the emergence of the “Jesus People” and

contemporary Christian music, was established by Chuck Smith in 1968. Calvary Chapel attracted scores of young people, who came for the music and community, and remained, building Calvary Chapel into a worldwide quasidenomination. The aftermath of Smith's vision to reach out to and create a space for "hippies," with their long hair, jeans, and flip-flop beach sandals, was the start of changes that not only influenced how most churches approach their Sunday morning worship services, but undoubtedly had an effect on the realignment of American Christianity since then.

Finally, Gaustad places the power and importance of religious institutions in the "denominations"—which for him were primarily Catholicism, Episcopalian, Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Judaism, and "Other." No doubt these denominations were the loci of religious life in 1968; yet, he could not find an institutional home for twenty-three million "Other Protestants"—second only in number to Catholics in his accounting—leaving them separate from the denominations that he does recognize. What, exactly, were those institutions that provided a home for almost 20 percent of Americans in 1968? My hunch is that most of these people were in either evangelical and Pentecostal denominational or independent evangelical and Pentecostal churches.

So, what has changed since 1968? I see three primary shifts that have taken place during the last fifty years: first, the increase in the number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation; second, the decline of denominations as the center of religious institutional life; and third, the rise of religious networks that are organized around charismatic leaders.

Perhaps the most significant shift is the decline of religious affiliation, and involvement more generally, since 1968. As noted previously, those who declined to identify with any religious group numbered at about 3 percent in 1968. As recently as 2007, the number of "religious nones" was 16 percent, but by 2014—less than ten years later—that number had increased to about 25 percent among the general population. Among young people, the number of religiously unaffiliated is even higher, at about 35 percent, and continues to grow. This development calls into question the longer-term viability of religious institutions as we currently know them. For example, religiously unaffiliated young adults are not necessarily disinterested in religion per se; rather, the current religious delivery systems—churches, synagogues, and the like—are not appealing to increasing numbers of them. This raises the question, can religious institutions figure out how to create an environment that attracts younger generations and their families, and

thus perhaps regain at least some of their past vitality and positive presence in American society?

A second shift is the decline of the importance of denominations as the center of religious institutional life. Thus, allegiance to one or another denomination has been replaced by individual congregations, such as megachurches and those organized around charismatic leaders, as the locus of religious activity. Further, even if a church is a part of a larger denomination, many of the members know nothing of the denominational affiliation or how that might relate to the identity of the church. As one example, the southern California megachurch Saddleback Church is part of the Southern Baptist Convention, yet it is never referenced nor identified in that way. Rather, it has its own identity that stands alone and separate from any denominational identity. Thus, brand names are no longer denominational but individual, whether of the congregation or the leader, or both.

The third shift, which is related to each of those previously noted, is the rise of religious networks that are organized around charismatic leaders. Again, this is a shift to *individuals* and the networks they develop, who themselves resist larger institutional affiliations, and in many cases have either pulled out of denominational affiliations or otherwise downplay their affiliations. In this, there is an explicit effort to extract a church or ministry from any denominational organizational structure and to situate the religious authority in the leader of the different congregations that make up the network. This is not limited to Christian churches; increasing numbers of entrepreneurial religious leaders have established outposts of religion and spirituality that are organized around their charisma and access to some form of religious community, experience, and fulfillment.

Taking these three shifts together, perhaps the largest change since 1968 has been the shift in locus of cultural and religious authority from the institution to the individual. It is the individual who decides what she or he likes or dislikes about or wants or doesn't want from religious institutions, and thus bases involvement on these preferences. Further, unless individuals find a place in a religious institution that meets their individual needs, they are ready to keep searching for a place that does, or to exit from religion altogether, opting instead to cobble together their own curated form of spirituality.

What is it that people want from their religious institutions in 2019? First, they want to feel good when they participate, and to be a part of a community that accepts and supports them for who they

are. They want to be inspired to improve their lives, not to radically change their lives or to otherwise not be who they authentically are. Second, they want to be able to pick and choose beliefs and practices that suit their own sense of right and wrong and what works and doesn't work for them. They want to be able to choose from among multiple institutions where they can have their spiritual needs met while keeping their options open to come and go from these different organizations. They are committed to themselves and their search—which may include multiple, simultaneous organizational involvements—rather than to a particular community. Third, they don't want to have to subscribe to all the tenets of a particular faith tradition, or to otherwise be told what to do or to believe by religious leaders. They are open to suggestions for improvement, but authority lies in their own agency and they are not interested in giving it up to a religious tradition that doesn't really understand their individual life experiences.

I make one final observation about religious institutions and their role in American society: Regardless of the changes described here, social, cultural, and political power today remains embedded in religious, especially Christian, institutions; however, this has shifted from the Protestant Mainline denominations to evangelicalism. As suggested, evangelicals built a broad range of religious institutions beginning in the aftermath of World War II. This has resulted in what we might call the "evangelical industrial complex," which includes a variety of institutions such as churches, schools (kindergarten through graduate school), media, political and legal organizations, and networks between leaders and between organizations. These institutions serve to create a common religious-cultural-political perspective that at once resists institutions and makes them possible, enabling institutional power that is disproportionate to their share of the population. To me, this seems much different than the role that Gaustad envisioned for American religious institutions, particularly with his emphasis on how, at least in his observations, religious groups were coming together, overcoming differences, and working together for the common good.

To close, I want to return to Gaustad, who, in the second paragraph of his chapter, writes, "it is the institutions of faith in America which possess the traditions, resources, and personnel that ultimately make religion in America worth talking about at all." We are in a time of intense institutional flux in all spheres of life, and we shouldn't expect that religious institutions will somehow be immune from this experience. Thus, the question facing religious institutions and those who are invested in them going forward (and, I suspect,

for leaders of religious institutions who are aware of the challenges they face) is, what will these institutions look like in the future? Can they adapt to a reality in which people are much less interested in commitment to an institution? And what role will, or can, these institutions play in the personal lives of adherents and in the public life of the United States? Will they play the positive and constructive role that Gaustad implies, both for the public and for individuals? Or will they be sources of cultural, political, and religious division? For answers to those questions we'll have to wait to see how religious institutions and their leaders respond to the challenges and opportunities they face.

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## **Christians and the Struggle for a New Social Order in Latin America**

**Rebecca C. Bartel**

Colombian theologian Gonzalo Castillo-Cardenas begins his contribution to *The Religious Situation: 1968*, with the image of a square in Mexico City called *Plaza de las Tres Culturas* (Square of Three Cultures). Castillo-Cardenas paints a hopeful image of the three "cultures" of Mexico represented by three platforms. The first celebrates the "admirable civilization of the ancient past," featuring temples of the first peoples of these territories, the Tenochtec, Nahuatl, and Mexica civilizations. The second platform is represented by a colonial Catholic Church built atop the indigenous temples. The church epitomizes the "dominance of the Church and the imposition of Christian religion on the Indians by the Conquerors." The author tells us that the third stage is represented by the "ultramodern" buildings that surround the square. These high-rise condominiums and office buildings might be described exuberantly as "the culture of Mexico today!" This is, Cardenas-Castillo suggests, a culture shaped by the "secularization" of the state and modernity of its institutions.

The place Cardenas-Castillo describes is also known as *Tlatelolco Plaza*, and holds a distinct place in Mexico's collective memory, a memory quite different from that of a redemptive, steady march of modernity and secularization. On October 2, 1968, the

same year that *The Religious Situation* was published, the Mexican military, in concert with state-supported paramilitary mercenaries, executed hundreds of student protestors in cold blood. Between three hundred and four hundred students were killed that day; there is still no official consensus on the number of the dead. The Mexican students were part of the global wave of protest and resistance that had taken hold of universities across Europe, Latin America, the United States, and Canada during the 1960s. Across the globe, the student movements were anchored in different themes. In Mexico, the protests of 1968 revolved around political representation and participation, as well as a vehement rejection of violent state repression.

At the height of Cold War anxieties, the student movements in Latin America were carefully monitored by the security apparatuses of the United States. The Mexican case was no exception. Leading up to the October 2 massacre, the CIA had been keeping a close eye on the protests erupting throughout Mexico, channeling a steady stream of intel to the Mexican state. According to recently declassified CIA documents, then-Mexican president, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, who ultimately gave the order to open fire at Tlatelolco Square, was himself on the CIA payroll. Díaz Ordaz was convinced that the student movements were part of a communist plot to overthrow the government, and the U.S. authorities had little trouble believing, and encouraging, Ordaz's paranoias that Russian and Cuban operatives were in the lead. Violent repression was the order of the day, sending the message that institutional power—at the ecclesial, national, and regional geopolitical levels—would not be cowed by organized, communist students.

Yet, there was nothing unusual about such U.S. intervention or involvement. Since the signing of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, Latin American politics and socioeconomic landscapes have been shaped in large part by U.S. interests. Between 1898 and 1994, the United States intervened to change Latin American governments more than forty times. All of Latin America's wars, dictatorships, and socioeconomic crises have occurred with varying degrees of involvement from the United States. Similarly, the religious situation in the hemisphere is equally entangled through uneven relations of power and access.

The relationship between the North, Central, and Southern Americas has long been fraught, and consideration of geopolitical trends and transhemispheric waves of economic change in Latin America require transnational analysis. That same degree of analysis is necessary when considering the transnational, transhistorical, and transcultural phenomenon that is religion. In other words, to read

the “religious situation” in Latin America in 2018, just as in 1968, demands an approach that provincializes “American Religion” through a more expansive consideration of “Religion in the Americas.” There is no North America without South America, and vice versa. The relationship between North and South is intimate, familial, and interdependent.

The essay “Christians and the Struggle for a New Social Order in Latin America” recognized this interdependence and calls for a radical reevaluation of the ecclesial relations between North and South. The author, Gonzalo Castillo-Cardenas (1932–2018), was a Presbyterian theologian originally from Colombia. Cardenas-Castillo led movements of progressive Protestant churches toward employing the spirit of Liberation Theology in ecumenical efforts to forge ecclesial movements for radical social justice and political reform. Cardenas-Castillo worked closely with other Latin American progressives and critical social scientists, including Orlando Fals Borda, the celebrated Colombian sociologist (and fellow Presbyterian), and Catholic priest Camilo Torres, Borda’s coconspirator in the establishment of Colombia’s first sociology department. In 2005, Cardenas-Castillo joined the faculty at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, where he stayed until retirement.

Cardenas-Castillo’s chapter in *The Religious Situation: 1968*, articulates a politically charged, theologically framed call to arms to the historical Protestant churches to join Catholic parishes throughout the Americas under the banner of a Theology of Liberation. Less an argument and more a manifesto, Cardenas-Castillo enunciates a vision for the future of “The Latin American Church,” and Latin America as a whole, to take up the cloak of Liberation theology. The call is to “emancipate society from religious criteria” and to develop a “concern for building a new social order.” Cardenas-Castillo begins with an invitation to historical Protestant churches to liberate themselves from the yokes of domination wrought by hierarchical denominational relationships with North American and European church authorities. Using the example of the few post-Revolution Protestant churches that remained in Cuba, Cardenas-Castillo calls for independence and “indigenization” of church practices to respond to the cultural, political, and spiritual needs of Latin Americans. Similarly, Cardenas-Castillo cites Colombian revolutionary Camilo Torres, a priest and sociologist who, in 1966, joined the Marxist guerrilla movement *Ejército Nacional de Liberación* (National Liberation Army), and was killed in combat. Torres, a Liberation Theologian and radical sociologist, is cited by Cardenas-Castillo as “a great Christian,” an example for all

Christians in Latin America who are interested in revolutionizing society and building a radically just social order. Cardenas-Castillo quotes Torres in his call to arms for a united, ecumenical revolution: "When authority exists contrary to the people, that authority is not legitimate and is called tyranny. We Christians can, and must, fight against tyranny."

The theoehtical imperative, to struggle ecumenically and with a revolutionary spirit, for the emancipation of the poor, I think, surely remains a relevant provocation for today, not only for Latin America and its corresponding "religious situation," but, indeed, for the whole of the Americas. Contemporary iterations and formations of Liberation Theology remain relevant and alive throughout Latin America. As Gustavo Gutiérrez, himself, has repeated, if "liberation theology has died, I was not invited to the funeral." To be sure, these are not dominant expressions of Christian praxis or discourse in Latin America today. To announce their irrelevance, however, is as confusing as it is wrong. Meanwhile, diverse emergences of Pentecostal, Charismatic, and neo-Pentecostal movements continue to grow throughout the region, some in deepening political alliance with conservative branches of the Catholic Church, others as completely independent movements; yet others are joined with denominational structures specific to the Global South. The religious landscapes of Latin America continuously diverge, multiply, and proliferate as Afro-Caribbean and African descendent religiosities grow in recognition and number, as well as Indigenous movements reclaiming spiritual terrain. Theological relevance of militant ecumenism for social justice notwithstanding, however, things have indeed changed in the political and religious landscapes of the Americas over the last fifty years, and our conceptual tools and media must also.

Religion in the Americas, as discipline and as object of study, operates and arises in the interstices of colonial histories and racialized hierarchies of power *en relato* with "diasporic assemblages," as Aisha Beliso-De Jesús has suggested, and within configurations of free market spiritualities that refuse discrete lines of denominational taxonomies or linear histories of origin and rupture. To think "Christianity" in Latin America is to think alongside transgressive acts of border crossings, blurring lines between "here" and "there"; troubling ideas of "prosperity," "blessing," or even "Pentecostalism" as they might be recognized in the North; and dismissing walls, both cultural and political, in a persistent movement toward a concept of *Americas*. Plural. To think Christianity, or religion, in Latin America today is to recognize that



the tired, historical timelines (Indigenous, Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal) do not form a neat tri-level tourist attraction, or even a coherent linear timeline, but rather rip at the seams when analytical pressure is applied. The movement of ideas and bodies across borders and religioscapes has been a constant throughout the history of the Americas. That North and South America are radically detached from each other is a product of exceptionalism, and belies the interconnected realities that racialized formations of hemispheric power differentials entrench.

Embodied and emboldened, blackened and browned religiosities (again, to incorporate Beliso-de Jesus's helpful language in considering the racializing power of religion in the Americas) are becoming recognized by scholarship and society, as they increment their presence and visibility. Santería, Candomblé, María Lionza, Vodou, and all other manner of Afro-descended and Indigenous religiosities have always been entwined with Christianity in Latin America. Indeed, to consider "Christianity" in Latin America is to contemplate a matrix of power upon which relations, connections, and disruptions occur across and within contested spaces of the transhistorical and the transnational, in concert with the political and economic structures that generate the lived realities of religious expression. For example, the misnamed "prosperity Christians" who conflate prosperity with survival, not ostentation, within austere measures of neoliberalism throughout the Americas show us that prosperity looks quite different on the peripheries of Bogotá than it does in the suburbs of Dallas.

The configuration of diasporic assemblage is helpful in thinking through the "Religious Situation in Latin America"—and even the struggle for a new social order—all the way down, as it were. These contested, uneven, and always dynamic webs of relations that religion, as diagnostic, helps us navigate, urges the development of a critical analytic that moves toward considering the politics of affect, such as the heady pulse of spirit-possessed dancing at a Pentecostal revival or a drum ceremony for Erzuli in Port-au-Prince. Additionally, attention to diasporic webs aids in better understanding degrees of embodiment in transnational relations of power, such as fervent prayers by young women in El Salvador to Jesús Malverde that they won't be impregnated when they are raped during their journey north to meet family in San Diego, or the offerings to María Lionza beside María *virgin santiissima* by Venezuelan refugees as they attempt to flee to Colombia with everything they own on their backs.

Diasporic assemblages and free-market spiritualities invite a consideration of Christianity in the Americas to be thought of as polemic, as concept rather than object. There is no “Christianity” in the Americas, there are only objectifications that must be understood in contingent terms as they arise in dynamic matrices of power and knowledge. Religion is often organized through violent political repressions, just as religion both shapes and is shaped by socioeconomic realities that generate wildly distinct productions of ritual, belief, and salvation.

Another way to approach the question of the religious situation in the Americas is to invoke the organizing principle of *Nepantla*—a Nahuatl term meaning “in-between-ness”—as theoretical trope. The idea was introduced by Chicana, feminist, queer theorist Gloria Anzaldúa in the 1980s to articulate a way out of Western–Northern binaries and either–or equations of nationality, religiosity, sexuality, gender, and culture. Life on the borderlands (a symbolic metaphor that holds for all of the Americas) requires such a decolonizing diagnostic. *Nepantla* clears an analytical space that opens a wider network of symbolic relationships and meanings. Much as dreams do this work for Amira Mittermeier’s insistence on the ethico-political wagers that in-between-ness as analytical category can open, *Nepantla* disrupts the illusion of the autonomous, self-possessed subject as it destabilizes “Christianity” or religion, in the Americas, as closed, autonomous, culturally and dogmatically discrete faith traditions—Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, and so on.

*Nepantla* understands the subject, and the webs of symbolic relationships and meaning that exist on the transnational grid, within the colonial, historical moment of the present. The religious subject is considered between forces of domination and colonization, as in between discrete borders of religious identity and cultural representation. *Nepantla* as critical analytic forges a site for meaning making from the middle, rather than the periphery.

To return to the *Plaza de las Tres Culturas*, today we might consider whether the scaffolding that upholds the platforms on which these three presumptively distinct historical moments exist are beside each other yet separate and unattached. The structures that make possible, or dismantle, a neat historical timeline are the things to consider, especially as they operate across borders, shaping assemblages of power, racialization, and capitalist distribution. I have proposed a layered understanding of religion in the Americas, emerging in forms of assemblage and in-between-ness, of Christianity as polemical concept, and the geontological considerations of the historical present of colonial inheritances and

immediate crises. These configurations create new space, and this new geographical space makes way for new critical terrain in which a relevant study of American religion is the Study of Religion in the Americas. I suggest a project of space-making that celebrates absence and presence, inspired again by Beliso-de Jesús—absent ancestors, absent parents after an ICE raid, absent children who have been disappeared, absent State apparatuses—and the lingering presences that these absences create, as they are shared by the always-dynamic diasporic assemblages, emerging and dispersing, contesting and acting in the *Nepantla* of our times. These actors and religious trends should be recognized for and by their in-between-ness, firmly at the center and not at the margins of our analysis. These embodied realities generate an evocatively transhemispheric incitation for analysis. At the same time, they make a struggle for a new social order hauntingly relevant.

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## Marshall McLuhan, Playful Prophet

John Modern

“Among the peoples of the world strange new vortices of power will appear unexpectedly.”

—Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964)

*Stop Me If You've Heard This One Before.*

Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980), a comparative literature professor turned celebrity media prophet, is still a pretty big deal in Canada. At least that's what I hear. Not so much in the United States beyond a knowing circle of media studies scholars and, with a few exceptions, not among those who either practice religion or study its American contours. Exceptions that prove the rule include Catherine Albanese's "Technological Religion" (1976) and S. Brent Plate's "The Religious Uses of Marshall McLuhan" (2011), as well as those who have looked to McLuhan's Catholicism as the key to his analytic import (McLuhan and Szklarek, *The Medium and the Light*, 2010) or,

conversely, McLuhan's analysis as the key to renewing the Catholic faith (de Souza, "Marshall McLuhan and the Divine Message," 2011).

To the degree to which McLuhan *has* been a marginal figure in the academic study of American religions, I am here neither to rehabilitate him nor to reiterate the lament that activities and ideas emanating from north of the U.S. border have too often received short shrift in accounts of American religious history. Rather, I am interested in the way in which one particular encounter with McLuhan, fifty years ago, anticipates a persistent pattern of avoidance within the field of American religions.

McLuhan's basic premise that the medium is the message—shared by different critical guises since the 1960s—is a radical challenge to any ontology of religion, or, for that matter, the humans who practice it. At its core, "the medium is the message" implies that the meaning of any communication—interpersonal, political, scholarly—is largely determined by the atmosphere in which it occurs. As that atmosphere becomes ever more subject to accelerating technological forms and algorithmic directives, humans enter into a new phase of coexistence with their media surround. To account for this new kind of human meant, first and foremost, to look outside it. For this was a kind of human whose origin story did not reside deep within the soul or cognitive architecture, but ever in relation to "the electronically induced technological extensions of our central nervous system" (McLuhan, "A Candid Conversation," 1969). Such suspicion has long been a challenge to so-called humanistic disciplines. Lately, in the field of American religions, such suspicion has invited strong statements, thin accounts, and occasional ridicule.

Which is to say, I am interested in McLuhan's analytic inasmuch as it is representative of what the historical study of American religions has often ignored, defended itself against, or both. (For those interested, these subtle strategies of avoidance are both institutional and epistemic and the subject of a special issue of *Religion* from 2012 on "The Study of American Religions: Critical Reflections on a Specialization," edited by Finbarr Curtis with essays by Tracy Fessenden, Jason C. Bivins, Kathryn Lofton, Rosemary R. Hicks, Richard Callahan, and myself). Still, too often, in a field that should and does know better, the invocation of this or that theorist (Benjamin! Butler! Foucault!) serves as mere window dressing, or, more perversely, one's learned dismissal. Why have projects that practice something like critical media studies or genealogical critique been considered to be largely illegible to historicist and otherwise commonsense approaches to the same material? For, even when such work has been considered by a

methodological mainstream, it is, more often than not, given peripheral status or an *insurgent* label.

I am thinking, here, for example, of Leigh Schmidt's condescending takes on the upstart shallowness of genealogy in his reviews of Tomoko Masuzawa's *The Invention of World Religions* (2005) in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* and my *Secularism in Antebellum America* (2011) in *Church History*. Curiously, such dismissal of genealogy vis-à-vis American religious history happens in other disciplinary spaces as well. See, for example, recent misreadings of Joan Wallach Scott's *Sex and Secularism* (2017). In "Do Secularism and Gender Equality Really Go Hand in Hand?" (2017), for example, Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins seems exasperated by Scott's refusal to pinpoint where religion ends and the secular begins. Similarly, in "Letting Their Hair Down" (2017), Laura Kipnis compares the implausibility of Scott's genealogical approach in *Sex and Secularism* with the sturdy common sense found in R. Marie Griffith's *Moral Combat* (2017).

What to make of the epistemic approach that, well, misses the point of critique? What to make of the dismissal of arguments that take seriously the undecidability of religion? What to make of the learned acrobatics that serve to protect scholars of American religion (and others) from "postmodern faddishness" (Prothero, *American Jesus*, 2004) and suspicions that seeks to unmask the metaphysics of presence and bask in the "flutter of artificial signs" (Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 2000)?

Before answering such questions, one might pause to consider how theory is done a disservice when it is kept at a distance from the archive, when it is quarantined and set apart from the "real" work of so much high-minded data collection. Which is to say that, within some prominent grooves within American religious history, the practice of genealogy can still be dismissed outright, cast as anathema, beyond the pale, and described as "exercise in esotericism" whose "dogged inscrutability" masks an ominous politics (Prothero, "Liberalism vs. Pluralism as Models of Interpretation," 2015). Such resistance to theory casts itself as reasonable, mature, respectful of tradition.

But I would say that it is just bad theory and cite the blistering "Theses on Theory and History" (2018) as my witness. Genealogical excavation, write Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Scott, and Gary Wilder, is not the "refusal" of historical work but rather a first principle for "critical historians [who] are self-reflexive; [who] recognize that they are psychically, epistemologically, ethically, and politically implicated in their objects of study."

Such resistance to theory is also odd even given the groundswell of recent works that take exception to the standard methodological models for studying American religions (Johnson, *African American Religions*, 2015; Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, 2017; Weisenfeld, *New World A-Comin*, 2017; Ogden, *Credulity*, 2018; Johnson, *Biblical Porn*, 2018; Fessenden, *Religion around Billie Holiday*, 2018; Wilcox, *Queer Nuns*, 2018; Coviello, *Make Yourselves Gods*, 2019). I would like to think that the increased visibility of these and other good works in American religions was inevitable. For, as Pamela Klassen has pointed out, the study of religion in the Americas lends itself quite nicely to the insights of genealogical critique. For in order to take political power, identity, and phenomenology into simultaneous account during one's study, one must engage in serious and sustained reflection on categorical imperatives. "A genealogical approach," writes Klassen, "can be rich with both category critique and historically detailed stories. As scholars of American religious history—and religion in the Americas—we have plenty of examples to draw upon to see how categories—in legal, scholarly, and popular versions—shape the lives and stories of the people we study" ("Liberalism vs. Pluralism as Models of Interpretation," 2015). The momentum of Klassen's words promises to be carried forward in a new journal, *American Religion*, to be edited by Sarah Imhoff and M. Cooper Harris and housed at Indiana University's new Center for Religion and the Human under the directorship of Winnifred Fallers Sullivan.

So I am optimistic. But these many exceptional works speak to the fact that theory remains ill considered, or, at the very least, insufficiently considered at present within too many institutional centers in American religion where graduate students are trained and articles are reviewed and books are published. Unspoken assumptions about the superfluity of theoretical inquiry persist among established scholars of American religions, particularly among those who may have "neglected to read any cultural theory since the nineties" (Hazard, *Reading Religion*, 2016). Klassen has suggested how these assumptions and the neglect add up to a "dichotomous approach" that naively frames genealogical inquiry as incapable of dealing with "flesh and blood people in their religious interactions" (Klassen 2015). This approach amounts to a refusal of sorts, or, at the very least, a sustained resistance to the immersion that theoretical work demands. Moreover, such resistance has only been emboldened by recent laments that we have entered into a post-truth politics in which figures like Jacques Derrida or Judith Butler are blamed for the present deterioration of the environment or

the public sphere (Kleinberg, "Pandering to the Timid," 2019). Such resistance to theoretical immersion has also been aided and abetted by the corporatization of the university and economic demands to make published works accessible to general readers. Who wants to begin the hard work of disentangling the skein of mutually reinforcing categories when there are dramas of good and bad religion to be had or new heights of religious literacy to be achieved?

Consequently, Allen Lacy's essay, "Marshall McLuhan, Playful Prophet," published in *The Religious Situation: 1968*, is a provocative entry for what it reveals about both the possibilities and limitations inherent in the study of religion some fifty years after its initial publication. Rather than read McLuhan as a media critic, futurist, or crank, Lacy read him as a theorist of religion. Although at times profoundly utopian and apolitical (mimicking the rhythms of his subject), Lacy hones in on McLuhan's usefulness to scholars in their understanding of the religious situation, circa 1968. Neither Lacy nor McLuhan exhibit sustained concern for the effects of the structural problems they identify. For example, there are no excursions on the role that media plays in the instantiation of racial or sexual difference. Yet Lacy distills something useful from McLuhan: his demand that we consider the phenomenon of religion to be a mediated one or, perhaps, even an effect of media itself. This is not quite the same thing as being an effect of humans. This is power in the Foucauldian sense, a situation in which racial and sexual differences are not simply generated but made compatible with one another, with capital, and with the categorical demands of the secular (Modern 2013). Indeed, McLuhan's vision of a posthuman future seems, in this present age of weaponized information, religious pathos, and political fracture, incredibly relevant.

### *I've Been to the Archive. Who Needs This Theory Crap?*

Lacy, a scholar of religion and philosophy and soon-to-be gardening columnist and inspiration to the herbivorean musings of Michael Pollan, was self-conscious that he and McLuhan were writing in apocalyptic times (Roberts, "Allen Lacy, 80, a Professor and Gardening Columnist," 2016). Cold wars were being fought with "subtle electronic informational media," anxiety was rampant, the sturdy structures of politics and education were deteriorating, and the assumption that the public sphere was a space for communication and rational dialogue was giving way to various peddlers of media persuasion. As Lacy dryly notes, "Easily the most

distressful feature of McLuhan's world" is "that at present human beings don't seem to be coping very well with its problems."

As Lacy contends, McLuhan was achieving his relevancy at the moment when the so-called consensus of America was actively breaking up, when the very act of arriving at interpretive certainty was being called into question, when popular culture and mass media threatened to overwhelm the sensorium of the populace. Like all prophets, McLuhan offers insight into the systems of communication that contain us, that is, "the ground rules, pervasive structure, and overall patterns of environment" that "elude easy perception." "But the question remains," admits Lacy, "how do we 'see' the media, the modes of perception in which we dwell?" This, I agree, is an excellent question. I take slight issue with Lacy, however, not so much for his reading of McLuhan, but for his failure to sit with this question long enough, to consider the difficulties of writing about secular modernity using categories that are immanent to it.

Lacy begins his essay with a nod to McLuhan's recently published *The Medium Is the Message*, designed by Jerome Angel. Calling the montage book of slickly designed word and image a "jittery scrapbook," Lacy considers it "clearly a very odd book, and all the more so when one considers the paradoxical relation of the author to his product." Lacy notes the irony of McLuhan's prophetic musings on electronic media being contained within a printed book. He does not note how the "shifting" and "extremely erratic" typography, its "disparate" and "fragmented and incoherent" use of image and illustration betray a critical engagement with categories immanent to the electronic order, his object of inquiry. Already, Lacy is glossing over the import of McLuhan as merely aesthetic rather than political. For the *Medium Is the Message* signals paradoxical relation whose stakes are much higher than Lacy admits—the paradox of intervening in the world in the language of the world, that is, the paradox of *immanent critique*.

To the extent that Lacy offers a convincing distillation of McLuhan's argument—both its content and form—this article remains *absolutely pressing* on at least two fronts: (1) for addressing the legacy of a Protestant sensorium in the study of religion, and (2) for becoming attuned to the making and unmaking of the human subject in an age of what McLuhan called "information overload" (McLuhan 1969).

Despite his playful prose, Lacy insists that McLuhan is a "deadly serious man . . . utterly free of sentimentality and moralism, who for perfectly good reasons of strategy adopts increasingly



'non-serious' means of communication—and that he therefore *incarnates* the problem he would seduce his reader into seeing." Inspired by McLuhan's aesthetic, Lacy suggests that scholars must take risks and free themselves from the chains of professionalism and conference decorum. In a nod to the politics underlying the hippie habitus, Lacy riffs on McLuhan's agenda: "We must explore the use of 'not single but multiple modes for exploration.' The old rationality of analysis and classification must be replaced by 'probing' of all sensory fronts simultaneously, and by the tentative use of multiple modes of explanation."

Lacy then identifies the scholarly payoff of McLuhan. In addition to McLuhan's use in analyzing Protestant popular theology, "new kinds of perceptual patterns in religion," and the life worlds contained in Biblical narrative, his focus on media lends itself to a reevaluation of the Protestant Reformation as a media revolution. "A church historian with a firm grasp on McLuhan's understanding of the effects of print on perception may well be able to do a great deal with the thesis that all of the various theological parties of the sixteenth century were coping with perceptual problems brought about by the introduction of the new media or print." There is a unity underlying the religious conflict as different beliefs and different doctrines were all responding to the same intensification of the media ecology. On one hand, this is a bold move on Lacy's part, as he implies that a change in the media environment affects the sensorium. On the other hand, changes in the sensorium only affect one's belief and doctrinal adherence, impressing on the subject as if from the outside. Media, in this framing of the Protestant revolution, remains at one remove from deliberations beneath the skin.

Lacy, here, stands alongside many in *The Religious Situation: 1968* in witnessing the crumbling of categorical façades. Like his cocontributors, however, Lacy does not take the full measure of this initial insight. For, rather than think through the mediation of categories and selves, that is to say, their radical *contingency*, Lacy designates the Protestant Reformation, from the "new" perspective of McLuhan, as the origin story of a secularizing modernity. In doing so, however, Lacy preserves an essence of religion as a matter of autonomous belief and doctrine that can still be accessed and studied despite McLuhan's insight into the utter saturation of electronic media into the human sensorium and the feel of categorical distinctions, including those of scholars. For, according to McLuhan, categories such as belief and doctrine are not simply contingent. They are alive, viral-like in their persistence. They are effects of discursive structures whose invisible presence is incompatible with a

notion of the human subject who chooses to believe or not in this or that doctrine.

Lacy argues that to pay attention to the medium ala McLuhan is to take risks, both analytically and professionally. I suggest, however, that to pay attention to the medium is to appreciate it as invasive. To read McLuhan with a sympathetic eye is to ask questions about the constitution of our contemporary humanity. Lacy, then, is representative of a kind of distant reading of critical theory that has long been common practice in the precincts of church history and extensions within the secular academy. Theory is epiphenomenal to the self-evidently religious content of the archive or ethnographic scene, but such a pose runs counter to the very premise of theoretical frames such as McLuhan's. Lacy acknowledges the talking points of McLuhan's corpus. For some reason, however, Lacy does not account for the import of McLuhan's central insight that we are drowning in information—a situation made possible by the advent and availability of new communication technologies—words to be sure but also signs that signify in nonverbal ways—laws and social conventions, architecture, in nods and winks, in fashion and bodily styles, and so on (Shannon and Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, 1949).

By the late 1960s, concerns were multiplying over the proliferation of words, ideas, and images in mass media (a classic nineteenth-century critical genre given new life with every media revolution since) (Miller, "Information Input Overload and Psychopathology," 1960; Henkin, *The Postal Age*, 2007). According to Lacy, McLuhan offers much leverage to see the situation clearly, or at the very least, with a sense of historical perspective. In his desire to recruit McLuhan into what might be called a project of secular consensus (that is, defining religious difference as a different orientation to media), however, Lacy glosses over McLuhan's more profound proposition. For McLuhan's concern was, in addition to the abundance of information, broadly construed, steadfastly focused on the fate of the human as a communication channel (Evine, "The Nature of the Glut," 2017). As Lacy, himself, paraphrases (without quite getting the gist of his own mimicry), "Language is not simply a vehicle for transporting objective facts and information. It enters into our perception of reality at the outset. Facts and information are inescapably shaped by the language in which they are conveyed. In short, the medium *is* the message."

For McLuhan, the die of a new humanism had been cast by radio, television, and computer technology. It was not a matter of gaining a metaperspective. It was not a matter of opting out but

surviving within an informational surround that had become fully biologized. "Today men's nerves surround us," wrote McLuhan. "They have gone outside as electrical environment." McLuhan, here, was signaling the advent of a different kind of human being, an entity whose nerves were on the outside and for whom the media environment was an interior matter. How to live through the "the new electronic environment" when "the human nervous system itself can be re-programmed biologically as readily as any radio network can alter its fare" (McLuhan, "Notes on Burroughs," 1964)?

As the translator of McLuhan's prophecy, Lacy identifies McLuhan's work as a wholesale threat to traditional Western understandings "of the relations between thought, language, and reality." Specifically, Lacy suggests that McLuhan's critique, both its content and form, is a wholesale subversion of Kant's take on the universal categories of thought. According to Lacy, McLuhan implies that "we can never be aware of our own language systems." So far, so good. Lacy does not, then, take the next step in considering the difference that different media make in such unknowing and in our refusal to give such unknowing a pride of place in any given analysis. Lacy does not, in other words, consider McLuhan's more dangerous proposition that categories such as belief and doctrine are much more than mediated phenomena.

### *All Along, Unknowingly.*

One must admit that Lacy's labeling of McLuhan as prophetic has only become a more reasonable assertion with the ongoing intensification and diffusion of media effects in the long twentieth century. This should not have been unexpected. For whatever the religious situation was understood to be in 1968—anxieties over political fracturing, the fraying of race relations, and the chickens of American imperialism and genocide coming home to roost ("Bring the war home!")—this was a moment when all involved sensed psychic dissolution. Mental health services proliferated, as did the notion of madness as a metaphor for social conditions (Staub, *Madness is Civilization*, 2011). With the overloading of established circuits in the neural network, the biological guarantee of a buffer that anchored the self as a the ground of knowledge gave way differently than it had ever done before. This was McLuhan's dark side—his challenge to Common Sense philosophy (and beneath it the echoes of Cartesian and Lockean epistemologies that idealize the self's integrity and society's progressive role in guaranteeing the self's immunity from untoward influence). "TV and all electric media

are unraveling the entire fabric of our society," McLuhan lamented. Having been "forced by circumstances to live with that society, I do not take delight in its disintegration" (McLuhan 1969).

McLuhan, with all of his silliness, invites a brooding skepticism to seep into one's humanistic ground. For, as McLuhan insisted, the intensifications of media revealed singular embodiments of a self—whether the skin, brain, or name—to be not only multiple but enabling fictions. Consequently, Lacy's gloss on McLuhan is historically significant. It is learned and productive, but is also limited by Lacy's inability to follow through on McLuhan's insight that the self who, say, possesses beliefs or adheres to doctrines is not only epiphenomenal to media of perception, but is also the mark of invisible systems taking hold at the level of consciousness and biology. In other words, the very categories of belief and doctrine carry with them versions of the human and human community that are at odds with how subjects actually arrive at any belief or doctrinal affiliation whatsoever—at least according to McLuhan's model.

Again, Lacy does not just miss McLuhan's point. He refutes it unwittingly. Despite McLuhan's challenge to a conventional humanism, despite Lacy's acknowledgement of that challenge and the unprecedented nature of our media ecology, despite Lacy's insistence that McLuhan was a revelation—despite all of this, Lacy's overview lapses into cliché. McLuhan, he writes, is part of the tradition of "great emancipators . . . who have sought to enlarge human freedom by making us aware of forces, situations, structures, or things, previously unperceived, which nevertheless have power to shape—often to distort—human existence." This is McLuhan as hero, as liberator, as savior. Like Freud, argues Lacy, McLuhan sought to "increase the therapeutic possibilities of rationality, consciousness, choice, and freedom." I submit, however, that this is a rather weak reading of both McLuhan and Freud, and avoids considering the possibility that rationality, consciousness, choice, and freedom are but high-minded words we use to convince ourselves that they are both real and realizable. Moreover, Lacy's romanticized reading of the human subject prevents him from considering the impossibility of ever escaping the signifying systems that determine—by way of a process that is not strictly human—the beliefs and doctrines and values that he holds to be self-evident.

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## The Religion of Black Power

Joseph Winters

The term “black religion” is more complicated than it appears; as a signifier, it exceeds its typical denotations. As William D. Hart points out, the standard narrative of black religion assumes that “black church and black religion are synonymous. [Protestant] Christianity in general and its institutional manifestation as church is the template for understanding what Black Religion is.” Although this tendency to conflate black religion and black Protestant Christianity illumines important features of black religious life, Hart rightly points out that it forecloses a wider understanding of the myriad ways that black people express piety and configure sacred values. In addition to other recognized institutions and traditions (Islam, Judaism, Candomblé), Hart gestures toward less recognized forms of religiosity such as ancestor worship, natural piety, and a general sense of dependence on the immanent sources of our existence. One can be religious without being committed to deities, supernatural beings, and so forth. By stretching our sense of the religious, we might see art, music, literature, and film as sites where awe, wonder, beauty, and horror are experienced and contemplated—a possibility that upends any stable contrast between the religious and the secular. More specifically, we might rethink black religion, or the juxtaposition of black and *religare* (to tie, to bind) as a general devotion to blackness, the opaque, or those energies, desires, bodies, and forms of sociality that have been, in Richard Wright’s words, “slapped out of humanity,” hurled to the edges of Human recognition. Black religion is a response to the haunting admonition at the end of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: “This is not a story to pass on.” On the one hand, there are stories—traumatic, ecstatic, inspiring—that we cannot ignore, forget, or pass over. At the same time, these are narratives, events, and experiences that cannot be easily passed down and incorporated into ordinary grammars and frameworks of meaning, including those that maintain a solid distinction between the transcendent and the immanent.

Vincent Harding’s important essay, “The Religion of Black Power,” published in *The Religious Situation* (1968), reflects both the tendency to treat Christianity as a “template for black religiosity” and the possibility of redefining black religion in a manner that cannot be reduced to a particular tradition and that smears the line separating the religious and the secular. Harding’s essay was written

at a moment when the militant language and vision of black power was replacing the civil rights rhetoric of nonviolence, hope, and the redemption of America. The image of respectable black church folk singing and marching was being supplanted by images of black men and women exercising their right to bear arms. The ideal of interracial harmony was being challenged by an emphasis on black love, self-help, and intraracial solidarity. Even though these transitions and shifts were significant, Harding's essay dissuades us from thinking that the black power emergence was entirely new, a total break from antecedent movements, especially regarding the presence and function of religion. Although "submerged" and "disguised," religious themes and desires pervade the practices and logics of black power.

Harding refuses the notion that the black power movement is a secular, nonreligious phenomenon. To the contrary, he contends that "the current black mood is in surprising harmony with much of the American trend towards a secular religion or religionless church which, though it often overreacts to older explicit orthodox formulations, is shaped unmistakably by the life of the streets." According to Harding, there is continuity between black power and the more explicitly religious civil rights movement regarding the practice of love—self-love to be exact. Here we might say that the commandment to "love thy enemy" is turned inward for the black power advocate. To put it differently, the emphasis on self-love is a response to internalized hatred, to an antiblack social order that trains black subjects to reject and denigrate qualities associated with blackness. Self-love is one response to Du Bois's notion of double-consciousness, or a condition in which black people see themselves through a white-dominated culture that looks at black people with contempt, pity, and ridicule. If this double-ness can be experienced as a cut or wound, a wound because the very ideals that black subjects are supposed to desire are defined in opposition to blackness, then black self-love is a kind of healing practice. Starting at home, black self-love is a survival strategy, a practice of care and intimacy, in a hostile world that is both fascinated and repelled by black flesh and black culture. Although this self-love can seem too short-sighted and narrow, Harding reminds the reader that black power practitioners express solidarity with other oppressed populations, other wretched peoples of the earth who have endured the terror of racial capitalism, coloniality, and perpetual war. One of the dangers of this celebration of black self-love is that it overlooks tensions and differences around class and gender. Consequently, self-love can become totalizing and hostile to abnormal, queer articulations of blackness.

In addition to self-love, Harding notices a religious quality in black power's attachment to a kind of messianism. Here the term *messianic* refers to black charismatic leaders, usually male, who are anointed to lead black people into a "new day out of the matrix of their sufferings." On this reading, figures like Marcus Garvey or Malcolm X have been appointed to rescue black people from darkness, death, and oppression. They are leaders who have facilitated and made possible a black resurrection, a deliverance from subjection and humiliation and an opening toward power and glory. Yet, we might supplement this initial understanding of the messiah with a more general understanding of the messianic. Here one should think of Walter Benjamin's notion of a weak messianic power, a power that connects liberation with remembrance of past suffering and injustice and that figures liberation as a break or rupture rather than the simple fulfillment of a telos or progressive trajectory. Harding's understanding of the messianic as a potentially destructive force resonates with Benjamin's insight. Harding writes, "Within the heart of black power stands the perennial tension between a salvation leading to swinging and singing and love, and a day of destruction demanded by a just God." If strands of Christianity emphasize the violence of divine judgment over the more idyllic images of lions lying with lambs, then Harding suggests that black power represents the darker side of black freedom struggles, the side that acknowledges how a better future requires some kind of violent interruption into the order of things.

This is where things get difficult and interesting. Harding suggests that black power's insistence on agency and autonomy imitates Christian notions of divine sovereignty. Quoting Ron Karenga and others, Harding draws attention to the ways in which the attributes of God (creating out of nothing, independence, autonomy) get valorized by black-power advocates. In response to divine omnipotence as the model for power and agency, Harding asks, "Is it not possible that the God who dies for his enemies, who rejects their terms and their weapons—and their kind of power—is also worthy of consideration as a model for the empowerment of the black community?" Although Harding acknowledges the dangers involved in urging oppressed groups to embrace vulnerability and weakness as a political and ethical resource, his question generates a series of further questions and queries. What are the limitations and possibilities attached to poaching notions of power and sovereignty from a system that has proven to be antiblack? Does the qualifier "black" alter and modify what we mean by *power*? What is the relationship between divine sovereignty, whiteness, male dominance, and collective investments in property? How is Harding compelling

us to think about the theological and religious underpinnings of our social–political order, a push that anticipates the recent popularity of political theology? Can we imagine and practice a kind of power based on dependence, uncertainty, and shared vulnerability? If so, what would this mean for those populations who are disproportionately susceptible to, and associated with, death?

These questions elicited by Harding's essay point to concerns and themes within contemporary black studies. As Denise da Silva points out in her 2007 text *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, the modern racial imaginary is largely based on the contrast between the transparent *I* and the affectable *other*. The transparent *I* is a version of the Unmoved Mover; it indicates a Euro-American fantasy of being able to determine and configure the rest of the world without being unsettled or touched by the racialized other. The transparent *I*, according to da Silva, becomes a collective sovereign (especially in the work of Hegel) that is defined by its ability to engulf and incorporate opaque peoples, peoples who supposedly cannot rule and contain themselves, and therefore have to be ruled by an external force. The transparent *I* is another name for what Sylvia Wynter calls *European Man*, for the sovereign subject who claims dominion over the earth. Insofar as this sovereign subject is an extension of the Christian God, we are encouraged to read racial modernity as “a symptom of the sacred.” In other words, to understand racial modernity—its formation, logics, and tensions—we cannot operate with a conventional religious–secular binary. As Harding suggests, to understand various forms of resistance to antiblack racism, we have to think about how these forms resist and rearticulate notions of sovereignty, power, love, and the messianic. This is a task that requires us to engage the religious and the secular as intertwined, as two sides of the same (antiblack) coin.

It is important to think about how Harding concludes his 1968 essay, a conclusion that has implications for contemporary black studies and black religious thought. He concludes by claiming that the future of black freedom struggles will rely on some kind of balance between King's optimism and black power's more cynical approach to the racial order of things. Whereas the black power advocate understands more than King that racial violence is constitutive of American social life, and cannot be relieved without an upheaval, King acknowledges that any struggle must be guided by some sense of possibility, some faith that the world we live in can change and be transformed. On this balance, Harding writes, “The necessary, relentless determination of Black Power to look fully on the evil of American life must be informed by some hope even more



solid than King's, some expectation of creative possibilities." For Harding, black freedom requires a tragic hope, or a hope that has been inflected by despair and anguish.

Perhaps what is so striking about Harding's juxtaposition is how it anticipates recent conversations between Afro-pessimists and black optimists. The Afro-pessimist, represented by an author like Frank Wilderson, can sound like Harding's depiction of black power's cynicism. The Afro-pessimist contends that civil society is structurally organized against black people. The Human and the black exist in an antagonistic relationship. Whereas other groups that have been excluded from the realm of recognition and respect can eventually be absorbed into the domain of the Human, the black/slave is a being on whom the very coherence of the Human depends. Violence against the black is the central condition of possibility for civil society. Therefore, Wilderson contends that only an end of the world as we know it can end antiblack racism, because antiblack racism is coterminous with the world. There is evidently an apocalyptic dimension to Wilderson's thought and practice. The black optimist, represented by Fred Moten, agrees with the pessimist that the Human is an antiblack project. Yet, Moten describes blackness as what cannot be completely captured or contained by the law, the State, or order, more generally. Blackness is that which resists objectification, especially in the moment of being treated like an object, instrument, slave, and so forth. For Moten, blackness is analogous to mysticism, to experiences that cannot be fully captured by language and grammar, or that require a new, poetic grammar. Consequently, Moten supplements the pessimist's emphasis on social death and violence with a reminder of the forms of sociality that have enabled black people to endure, cry, laugh, dance, pray, and wander. Although there are crucial differences between the optimist and the pessimist, one thing that connects them is the turn to the religious to make sense of an antiblack world—the apocalyptic for Wilderson and the mystical for Moten. This "turn" corroborates Harding's claim in 1968 that black thought and practice is always rearticulating the sacred and the religious.

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## **A Report on Churches and Taxation**

**Lila Corwin Berman**

Who would have thought that “the religious situation” in 1968 had anything to do with taxation? In a decade of Vietnam and Woodstock, hippies and the Free Speech Movement, JFK and Nixon, and so many more movements and figures that would have affected the “situation,” religious and otherwise, in the United States, taxation might have seemed marginal at best. Yet, I want to make the case that the chapter on taxation is, in fact, the most important one in the volume. Simply, “the religious situation” as it existed 1968, and as it continues to exist today, would be unimaginable absent state and federal tax treatment of religion.

“The Report on Churches and Taxation,” penned by “an informal organization of Episcopal lawyers and clerics in the New York City area,” correctly asserted that through the tax exemption, the American state (here to include its manifestations at local, state, and federal levels) recognized religion. By exempting religious institutions from the federal income tax and state and local property taxes, and by allowing individuals to deduct contributions to religious institutions from their taxable income, the American state learned how to see religion—and American religion learned how to be seen by the American state. The chapter suggested that tax policy made religion visible to and controllable by the state, although it also endowed religion with a special status that gave it particular power over the state.

The authors believed taxation represented the neglected and often unseen logic of American religion and American power. Insofar as they were not entirely content with how religion or power operated in 1968 in the United States, they hoped to expose the system upon which each rested. One might today—and probably yesterday, as well—read this chapter as an exercise in minutia, a catalogue of fine lines and administrative categories; but then one would be missing the drama of discovering an often-unseen logic, of decoding an entire system, and of peeking through a veil.

If one has ever considered the tax exemption of religious institutions as meriting more than a fleeting thought, likely the basis of consideration has been its constitutionality. Not so these authors, who, after a brief review of court opinions, dismissed any claims that the exemption violated the establishment clause of the First Amendment. So long as the state applied the exemption equally, as

guided by the Fourteenth Amendment, the tax exemption of religious institutions did not strike the authors as a constitutionally interesting question.

Instead, the real question—the one that mattered to the authors and continues to matter—is whether equal treatment in the application of the tax exemption actually extends equality. This question, far more than a constitutional matter, occupied the attention of the authors. After all, it was one thing to say that the state must treat all religions equally, but quite another to track whether that equal treatment furthered a much broader goal of equality. For the authors, if the public writ large did not benefit in some fashion from the exemption of religious institutions from taxation, then they owed the public a debt: as large as the tax revenue they withheld from the public. We can presume that the authors regarded religion as providing good to individuals and to specific communities of adherents, but were these rewards worthy of state support?

The problem in 1968, only exacerbated in the following decades, was that tax exemptions tended to replicate and harden economic inequality. Whereas the American system of income tax generation embraced a progressive model, demanding that those with the highest income incrementally absorb the greatest tax burden, its system of tax exemption was regressive. For example, in 1968, the top marginal tax rate stood at 70 percent for all dollars earned above \$200,000, 69 percent for earnings over \$180,000, 58 percent for earnings over \$160,000, and so on, resulting in the highest effective tax rate levied on the biggest earners. (For the record, the top marginal tax rate in 2017 was slightly under 40 percent for all dollars earned above \$470,700.) When flipped on its head, however, the same system offered the highest exemptions—or discounts—for the biggest earners. Furthermore, in the case of the property tax, which tended to be a flat tax, not a progressive one, exemption and taxation rewarded those with the greatest wealth, for whom a fixed percentage would almost always be a lower share of their total assets.

Religious institutions' tax standing imprinted them with the basic inequalities that bedeviled American democracy. Tax policy served as a fulcrum of American political economy, constructed to achieve a particular balance between private interests and the public good. In each case in which the state garnished income from a private entity, it asserted its right to do so in the interest of the public good. In this way, the state used democracy to manage capitalism. In those cases when it exempted a private entity, whether a religious institution or a private foundation that held assets, it named the private as a steward of the public. Thus capitalism might come to

manage democracy. The authors of this chapter, who had a sharp understanding of American tax law, could not blunt their perception that religious entities so exempted not only benefited from but could even extend the inequalities of capitalism.

This chapter stands the test of time primarily because it has had so little influence, from 1968 through the half century beyond. Although debates over tax policy are perennial, the exempt status of religious institutions has never been raised in a serious way for reconsideration. I am unaware of any religious institutions that have denied themselves the tax exemption out of concerns about how it reproduces inequality or freezes capital from circulating to solve public problems.

Nonetheless, religious institutions cannot fail to notice that, by taking the tax exemption, they accept the structuring logic of the American state. At times, the state's ability to act through the tax exemption has been plainly visible. For example, in 1983, the United States Supreme Court ruled that Bob Jones University had justly lost its tax exemption when it failed to remediate its practice of denying admission to black students who were in interracial relationships. Although the university argued that its injunction had a biblical basis, the government responded that it was not compelled to extend the tax exemption to religious schools (which it differentiated from churches or "purely religious institutions") that operated contrary to stated public policy—in this case, the eradication of racial discrimination.

In his concurring opinion, Justice Lewis Powell agreed with the majority that the revocation of the tax exemption did not violate the university's First Amendment rights, but protested what he perceived as the creeping authority of the government, through the Internal Revenue Service, to mandate "conformity" through a test of whether or not exempt organizations acted consistently with governmental policy. To the contrary, he believed the spirit of tax exemption was to foster "diverse, indeed, often sharply conflicting, activities and viewpoints" from those of the government. Nonetheless, even if the state intended to subsidize a diversity of beliefs through the tax exemption, the juridical process of exemption always would differentiate between qualifying and disqualifying behavior, and, in this way, religious institutions that accepted the gift of tax exemption also accepted the state's discipline and control.

Yet to see tax exemption only from the perspective of the state exercising power over religion is to miss the power that religious institutions could gain over the state through tax exemption. Quite radically, the authors of the 1968 chapter allowed themselves to wonder if religion was categorically a public good. They suggested

that some of its property-related behaviors did not necessarily deserve government subsidy. On their minds may have been the racism that coursed through many American religious institutions, but more explicit in their analysis was profound concern about wealth accumulation in religious institutions. The totality of property owned by religious institutions in the United States could only be deserving of exemption from income and property taxation if it all served the public good, and the authors were certain this was not the case. Thus, they recommended several new standards to differentiate between property that truly served the public good and other kinds of property that seemed mainly to serve the interests of capital growth.

Beyond the fact that the chapter has stood the test of time because its subject matter is simultaneously so central and yet so neglected from how we understand the relationship between the state and religion, we should also recognize it for making a radical statement about property ownership and the public good. Although some forms of privately held property may bend toward the public good, other forms simply cannot, even if owned by tax-exempt entities, such as religious institutions.

At its core, taxation is a system of capital redistribution. To the extent that the state sanctions exemption, its formal standard is whether the exemption substantively achieves the same ends as taxation: capital redistribution in line with the state's prevailing economic theory. For this reason, the state makes certain requirements of tax-exempt entities. For example, since 1969, the government has mandated that private foundations make annual distributions to the public good of at least 5 percent of their assets; if they fall short, these foundations stand to lose their tax exemption. In the case of so-called public charities, however, such as religious and educational institutions, the government has not made this requirement, certain that their very purposes guarantee that their capital, distributed or not, is harnessed to the public good.

In 1969, when Congress put into effect differential treatment between private foundations and public charities, one might have imagined it would periodically reassess its assumptions that private foundations needed to be compelled to redistribute some of their assets, whereas public charities could be counted on to do so. This has simply not been the case. To the contrary, public charities have shown remarkable creativity when it comes to new methods for accumulating capital, but in few circumstances has Congress even considered shifting its regulatory apparatus to compel this sort of capital—all designated as part of the public good—to enter into streams of redistribution.

How prescient, then, were the authors of the 1968 chapter to see the link between tax exemption and capital consolidation. In the form of endowments, donor-advised funds, and supporting foundations, religious institutions and public charities in general have more ways than ever to leverage their exempt status to grow capital, all with very few state regulations mandating its use, or even its circulation.

We could no less understand “the religious situation” in 1968 than we can in 2019 without confronting the problem of taxation. When we pull at the threads of how the state applies tax law to religious institutions, we loosen a whole swath of assumptions about American religion. Far from taking its shape from punctilious observance of removing religion from the state, the logic of disestablishment empowers the state to encourage and control the growth of religious institutions. Yet, even as we realize, as legal historian Sarah Barringer Gordon tells us in a 2014 article, that the state has been “hidden in plain sight” of American religion, we also understand why we might have missed seeing it there. By provisioning religious institutions, like other so-called charitable or nonprofit entities, through tax exemption, the state scattered itself broadly and quietly. In name, it justified its apparent absence through the standard of the public good, but it defined the public good through a set of standards focused on form, not substance. Thus, the idea of the public good—a deep idea connected to the very aspirations of a political community—grew thin and hollow, formal not substantial. The public good became no more and no less than a tax status.

Insofar as a tax system represents a political unit’s ideals about the distribution of power, it may actually be a decent vehicle for thinking about the public good. In the fifty years since 1968, the inequality index—the gap between the wealthiest and the rest—in the United States has increased markedly, reflecting what political scientist Suzanne Mettler terms “upwardly redistributive” laws and financial policies, including tax policies. We can have spirited debates about whether changes in tax code would create sustainable solutions to vast inequality, but we must acknowledge that the highest earners and asset holders in our country pay lower rates of taxation today than they did in the late 1960s. Religious entities are far from the only tax-exempt organizations in the United States, and the benefits they receive pale in comparison to the tax benefits, for example, that investment fund managers receive from being able to treat carried interest as capital gains, not income.

In the final analysis, the Episcopal clerics and lawyers who wrote about tax exemption as a piece of “the religious situation” of

the late 1960s waded into the technical language of tax code because they viewed religion as a part of the political economy of the United States. They wanted to know if the political economy—the laws and policies—in which their church participated served a vision they could embrace. Their answer is historically valuable, showing the reforms they believed necessary at the time to make the tax system align with the way they believed power should be distributed. Their question more than their answer, however, remains pressingly relevant today, first, to alert us to the fact that so few others have thought to ask it, and, second, to ask us if it is in our moral imagination to think of a tax code, a state, and a “religious situation” that would truly take on the task of equality, even if doing so would mean thinking of property and the public in entirely new ways.

Imagine if every institution that received a tax exemption, every individual who took a tax deduction, every entity that reaped rewards from America’s tax code asked, is this serving a public good? If not, what must change? Without a doubt, the answers would be various and full of conflicting visions, but they would illuminate power structures that too often appear unchangeable or inevitable because they hide their logic in the shadows of ponderous codes.

Imagine if we regarded questions about taxation as deeply religious. Scholars, practitioners, believers, nonbelievers: Let us take inspiration from a little-noticed chapter published in a relatively neglected volume in 1968 that revealed that American religion is, if not fully, at least partially, an IRS category.

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## The Secularization of the Sacred

Kathryn Lofton

Before we do anything else, let’s take stock. If you are reading this, you are likely in a department of religious studies, or you teach at least one course with the word “religion” in its title in another department (maybe history, Jewish studies, or sociology). I’d like you to pause and reflect on two questions: First, what is the most popular course taught in your department? Second, in your field of specialization, what is the status of comparative work?

Your answers to these questions are not irrelevant to whether you can stomach what Joseph Campbell (1904–1987) did in his contribution to this 1968 volume. Even more: Your answers suggest whether you can access his perspective as he wrote this and his many contributions to public conversations about religion; about human possibility; about myth and ambition, bravery and evil.

Think about the most popular course in your department. How do you explain its popularity? When I raise this question among groups of faculty, I sometimes hear pride about whatever is popular; often, too, I hear judgment, maybe a little disdain, for the popular courses. Popular things are rarely neatly or universally popular; their popularity usually accompanies some condescending judgment about why something is popular. (This is what leads pop stars to shrug to reporters: *Haters gonna hate.*) Yet, the popular courses in our departments offer a window into the questions our students have, as well as the answers they like to hear. Every faculty member has a point of access to understanding the sociology of their present moment; that point of access is the demographic presence, or absence, of students in their classrooms.

Whatever else one might say about Joseph Campbell, he was—by any measure—a popular academic. His 1988 conversations with journalist Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, remain one of the most popular documentary series in the history of American public television. *Time* magazine placed his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), in its list of the one hundred best and most influential books written in English. Perhaps the most tell-tale sign of his popularity is how much people liked to criticize him. Throughout his life, and subsequent to it, prominent articles appeared decrying his work as sexist, anti-Semitic, racist, and collusive with trickle-down economics. Haters don't waste their hate on the inconsequential.

I asked the other question about the status of comparison in your field of expertise because there is, in the history of courses about religion, a strong correlation between comparative courses (“World Religions,” “Religions of the East,” “The Persistence of Religion,” etc.) and popularity. In the departments where I have studied and taught, there is also some nostalgia for a time when teaching those classes wasn't so, well, embarrassing, before there was critical resistance to the inevitable flattening, not to mention the vestigial colonialism of, world religions. I want to be clear that those who express nostalgia don't seek to return to a world before the widespread agreement with what David Chidester and Tomoko Masuzawa, among others, have explained so brilliantly. They simply seek to reclaim some popularity. There is, in some corners of the



study of religion, a little sadness that we can't make our historicism, our anthropological foci, and our literary criticism as appealing as the phenomenology of religion produced by figures as scholarly as Mircea Eliade and as accessible as Campbell himself.

Perhaps your department has found a solution to this. Perhaps you have found a way to make popular the humanistic and social scientific approaches that predominate work on the history of religions in the academic study of religion since Campbell's 1987 death. If this is so, I would love to see more public dialogue about this—from people who lead courses about religion that draw more than eighty students. As someone who teaches such courses, I would like to converse with others about how they would explain that course's popularity as a theory of, or sociology of, or philosophy of religion.

Campbell is unabashedly interested in helping people think about what is popular and what is valued. He is concerned that we live in a world where what we value *is* popularity, and this, he thinks, is a dangerous turn of human affairs. (Here, I think it is easy to say that we live in a time where his essay could still be read, as every other day a long-form essay is published worrying about what the recruitment of social media followers does to the public good.) In the 1968 essay that motivates these remarks, Campbell works hard to develop a critique of what has been secularized. He is not worried about secularization, itself; he is worried about what was designated as sacred to begin with. In his many writings, Campbell looked at the ways mythic traditions valorized figures willing to go against the social grain. He wants people to pursue a sense of religious awe that is connected to all things—to the gloriously beautiful things to the filthy and grotesque.

Right away, I have probably lost you (maybe around *mythic traditions*), because most scholars have been trained to observe what people mean when they talk about awe, not pretend to participate in the prescription of awe. Insofar as we are interested in what made Campbell popular, we must acknowledge that this overt assignment of the "good" is exactly what people liked so much about him. Campbell spent a lot of time describing religious myths and religious motifs to prove his grand sense of what unified the religious systems of the world. Or, rather, what structured their major difference, since Campbell argued that there were two kinds of worship in the world: Oriental (elsewhere in the essay made exchangeable with Vedantic and Buddhist) and Western. The ultimate goal of Oriental religion is to align individuals with a recognition of the sacred power in all things; the ultimate goal of Western religion is to recognize that sacred power in a god distinct from all creation.

Even as I wrote that summary, I felt nervous. What is this person talking about? I mean: *I know what he is talking about*. I get the comparative point, namely to suggest that in Eastern religions, people realize themselves as spiritually powerful rather than recognize themselves as children of Christ or members of the tribe of Israel. I *get* that, I just don't know if we should say these things aloud anymore. To be clear, Campbell has no fear, himself, diving deep into the classification of two worldviews, basically arguing that monotheistic worship makes the wrong kind of sacred. "The Gods and Buddha in the Orient are, accordingly, not final terms—like Yahweh, the Trinity, or Allah in the West—but point beyond themselves to that ineffable being, consciousness, and rapture that is the All in all of us," he writes. We worship gods outside us like celebrity and money and we don't see the divinity of our consciousness. Unsurprisingly, to those who know his work, he calls this confused alignment of self with the wrong sacred object *mythic identification*.

He doesn't really want to talk about monotheistic gods or religion. He wants to talk about spiritual energy and worshipful practice. He wants to talk about "that which is thus ultimately transcendent of all definition, categories, names, and forms," which is "the very substance, energy, being, and support of all things, including ourselves: the reality of each and all of us." He wants to prove that his version of what is Oriental, to prove that the "you" assigned in its sacred texts, isn't the historically constituent individual *you* but the epic second-person YOU of eternal meaning. To prove this reading of the "Orient" is correct, he'll quote from the Upanishads, Pyramid Texts, the Book of the Dead; he'll do close readings of images from Mesopotamian and Sumerian and Babylonian seals; he'll call upon Celtic mythologies and images from Christianity and Islam. He'll show how the Bible makes its readers mythically disassociate from the world, because the sacred in it is embodied by a God who isn't identical with the world but related to the world, "as cause to effect." Western worship manifests an "overbearing" religion that Campbell also calls "exclusive, authoritative, collective, and fanatic."

Reading Campbell, it is not hard to argue that he is as much a theologian as scholar of literature; it is also not hard to see why Orientalists saw themselves as liberal heroes and not chauvinists. Sure, he renders a wide diversity of scriptures and practices into consolidated concepts of the sacred; sure, he imagines he knows what it means to be an accursed person; but he does these seemingly problematic acts of judgment in order to encourage our highest

selves, and to discourage Western superiority. How wrong can this be? Right?

Well, no. We won't forgive Campbell his flattening that easily. Even more, we haven't actually forgiven ourselves for being people whose scholarly parents and grandparents were prone to him, maybe even taught him, or taught *like* him. I mean this in two senses. First, many people who study religion have biographical similarities to him. Many people who study religion were born into a particular religious tradition (in his case, Catholicism), and found through some encounter with a liberal arts curriculum (in his case, at Dartmouth) a new view toward the world that separated them from their natal sectarianism. Many people in the study of religion dallied with some sort of spiritual play (in his case, with Theosophy), and then tucked into foreign languages (in his case, French and Sanskrit) to read root scriptural materials. Many people studied abroad, or lost some years in a countercultural context (although perhaps not many got to hang with John Steinbeck); many people in the mid-twentieth century found themselves tenured without a Ph.D., and ranging among humanistic fields in their effort to name what is religious and sacred in a world of secularization. We deny sometimes these spiritual seekers as our ancestors at our own detriment; they still visit our classrooms, even if we claim our classrooms are not designed for their seeking.

Second, like Campbell, many people who study religion were interested in absorbing themselves in worldviews far apart from the one they perceived themselves to have been born into. As I have visited multiple departments of religious studies, I have often heard people argue that studying religion is valuable because reading old texts or learning about "different cultures" will transport students as they themselves were transported: to another way of seeing the world, to a strange cosmology or unknown theory of life. Campbell sought to domesticate those other worlds (whether from the Upanishads or the Book of the Dead) to make them legible to his presumptively Western readership. He did not like the Western individual who sought to empower their individuality. He wanted to give students another way to see the world other than the popularly distributed view of their own Benjamin Franklin domination of industry and spirit.

To take a class with Joseph Campbell would be to realize the shallowness of individual self-determination and to be called for another life than the one sold as mainstream in the West. At the end of the 1968 essay, he says we are living in a time of bleakness and loneliness, but still, "there is," he writes, "in fact, in quiet places a

great deal of deep spiritual question" and "outside the sanctified social centers, beyond their purview and control," there are people going to seek the universal truth of their belonging. To take a class with Campbell would be to find yourself in a context where pursuing the quiet place was supported, touted, endorsed, prescribed.

I get it if you don't think this is what a classroom is for. I want to be clear: This is not what *my* classroom is for. Well, not exactly. I can't pretend I'm not interested in diagnosing culture so as to arguing for resistance to it. I can't pretend I'm not concerned with monomyths, although I focus on patriarchy and white supremacy while he locked into Holy Grail questing and fostered Star Wars results. All I mean to ask, through this little note on the secularization of the sacred, is: What is your classroom for? How have you figured your classes, consciously or unconsciously, in relation to some idea about present society that you seek to alter or to reform? What is that idea? How is it articulated? How is it practiced in the readings and assignments for your class? Time and again on surveys distributed to students about why they take courses in the humanities, they give answers like: "I want to expand my worldview." "I want to understand other cultures." "I want to learn a philosophy of life." Campbell gave that; he was a popular teacher. If we don't give it, what do we give in place of it?

If you are fortunate enough not to worry about the potential institutional consequences for your department if your courses aren't popular, I envy you. Actually, though: I don't. If I learned one thing from Joseph Campbell, it is that none of us gain through rampant solipsism. The only true good will come from gaining consciousness of what we are doing when we sit together, and why we think it's right to do so, again and again, over time.

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