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FEATURE STORY:

Bringing faith and spirituality to workplace also spreading discrimination?

A new study suggests that the recent interest in bringing faith and spirituality to the workplace may be one factor behind rising rates of complaints about religious discrimination on the job. In the *Review of Religious Research* (March), Christopher Scheitle and Elaine Howard Ecklund note that the rate of reported complaints of workplace discrimination regarding religion has increased from 2.1 percent of all cases of workplace discrimination (1709 incidents) in 1997 to 4.0 percent (3721) in 2013, growing in both number and proportion. The issue of workplace discrimination against religion drew national controversy when the clothing retailer Abercrombie and Fitch was found liable in 2013 after it fired a Muslim employee for refusing to remove her head covering. Past research has found that specific religious identities, such as Muslim, as well as expressing religious identities, can increase the risk of workplace discrimination. But is religion discriminated against apart from specific religious identity and expression? The researchers used a survey of nearly 10,000 U.S. adults that draws on the GfK KnowledgePanel, a nationally representative online panel of over 50,000 individuals and one of the few panels to ask a question about religious discrimination in the workplace.

Scheitle and Ecklund find that the frequency with which religion comes up in the workplace is positively associated with perceptions of religious discrimination. Just the presence of religion as a topic of conversation in the workplace “appears to present an independent risk of perceiving religious discrimination...moving from a workplace where religion never comes up to a workplace where religion often does almost triples the probability that an individual will perceive religious discrimination,” they write. The impact of such a dynamic on perceptions of discrimination is greater for mainline Protestants, Catholics, adherents of eastern religions (aside from Islam and Hinduism), those who are not religious, and atheists and agnostics.

Muslims and Jews were more likely to perceive religious discrimination even when religion never comes up at work. Scheitle and Ecklund conclude that this finding may be because these religious minorities feel more visible in the workplace and may have a greater sensitivity to discrimination than others. The recent interest in religion and spirituality in the workplace may also be a factor in this increase of discrimination complaints as such programs encourage the environment where these perceptions may take hold. In the UK there is a similar percentage of reports about religious discrimination on the job. A study conducted by the UK polling firm ComRes finds that 3 percent

report being personally discriminated against because of their religion, which would be equivalent to 1 million people making such complaints.

(*Review of Religious Research*, <http://www.springer.com/social+sciences/sociology/journal/1364>;
ComRes, <http://www.comresglobal.com/faith/>)



ARTICLES:

Four years on, more questions than answers in assessing the Francis papacy

Four years after Jorge Bergoglio became Pope Francis, not a few Catholics observers are puzzled by an unusual papacy. In a series of articles in its March issue, the Catholic magazine *Inside the Vatican* (March/April) has attempted to gather insights on his papacy by a range of contributors. While *Inside the Vatican* is definitely not in the “progressive” camp of the church, it is striking to see several authors express unease about current trends at the top of their church. Editor Robert Moynihan states that Pope Francis has indeed been praised by “the world” and mainstream media, while traditional Catholics have grown increasingly critical. But he disagrees with the narrative of a “rogue Pope” breaking with church traditions, emphasizing the pope’s personal piety and other aspects conflicting with the secular perception of the pope. Similarly, K.E. Colombini feels that Pope Francis has not finished surprising observers. One of the examples quoted in the article is the leniency towards the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X, which might soon be regularized as a

personal prelature. Colombini also reminds readers about the strong statements by the pope opposing gay marriage.

Other contributors, however, seem less sure. According to William Doyno, after several statements in 2013, a number of conservative commentators had praised the pope “for his inspiring orthodoxy.” Four years later the same ones rebuke him for promoting liberalism and worldliness. Published in April 2016, the apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* has become a text of contention, seen as opening the door to communion for



divorced and civilly remarried Catholics. “The result of Francis’ mixed signals is mass confusion,” the author writes. Similarly, philosopher and historian Thomas Storck, while conceding that “not everything is bad” and that some conservative critics “only reveal their own lack of knowledge of Church teachings” when it comes to issues such as capitalism or the environment, states that “we have a Pope who does not really champion important aspects of the Faith.”

One of the reasons why Pope Francis was elected was the need to reform the Curia after the Vatileaks scandals writes British canon lawyer Edward Condon. Quite early in Francis’ pontificate, there were large-scale announcements with prospects of a complete rethinking of the church’s governance structures. After four years, however, the real impact of those moves for curial reform is questioned. In contrast with the stated aims of the pope, a result of this effort is “an apparent, unintended empowerment of the Secretary of State,” and thus a centralization of power. Pope Francis is impatient with canon law, but changes he wants to introduce “depend upon systematic and coherent legal implementation.”

Meanwhile, the title of the new book *Will Pope Francis Pull It Off?* (Liturgical Press, \$14.95) clearly gives away author Rocco D’Ambrosio’s pro-reform bias, but the volume is unique in attempting to marshal social science theories (if not methods) to make his case for the pope’s agenda. The slim book (100 pages) argues that the apparently off-the-cuff remarks and responses to various incidents and scandals by Francis all reflect a carefully planned strategy of church reform. D’Ambrosio, a political philosopher at Rome’s Pontifical Gregorian University, writes that the protests by conservatives against the pope’s actions and statements are a natural reaction to Francis’s relentless drive to consolidate the reforms of Vatican II. The book focuses on the papal denunciation of corruption and power-seeking in the Vatican and other quarters of the church, best reflected in Francis’s decisive steps to root out pedophilia among priests and the way the crisis has been enabled by bishops. The author leaves the question of his book’s title unanswered, as he argues that it is Francis’s call for solidarity with the poor and refugees that may face the greatest

resistance from dioceses, parishes, religious orders, and church organizations, which too often mirror their counterparts in the political and financial worlds.

(*Inside the Vatican*, P.O. Box 57, New Hope, KY 40052; <http://www.insidethevatican.com>)

CURRENT RESEARCH

● **Even though evangelical support for Donald Trump did not stop at the voting booth, it may not be the case that such pro-Trump sentiment will drive away members from these churches, writes political scientist Paul Djupe in the blog *Religion in Public* (April 11).** As an example of continuing evangelical support for Trump, Djupe finds that from May 2016 to February 2017, *every* religious group has become less supportive of temporarily banning Muslims from entering the country except for white evangelical Protestants; the gap between evangelicals and nones on this issue grew from 28 to 41 percentage points. For several years the narrative has been that religious nones dropped out because of Religious Right influence in the churches. Djupe writes, “To us, it makes little sense that political liberals would leave religiously liberal churches—where a large portion of ‘nones’ come from—because of a conservative political movement.” Of church attenders surveyed in the post-election season, 14 percent reported leaving by the post-election period, “a number right in line with several of our previous estimates from surveys in the 2000s. ‘Leavers’ were distributed across the religious population, including 10 percent of evangelicals, 18 percent of mainline Protestants, and 11 percent of Catholics. This represents an enormous amount of churn in the religious economy.”

Those who believe politics is divisive were more likely to leave political churches, and the leavers over Trump were more specifically concerned over his candidacy than over the Christian Right’s influence. Researchers found that those who perceived disagreement with their congregation over Trump were the most likely to report leaving their house of worship by November. Those who felt very warmly



toward Trump and perceived very little support for Trump from their clergy were more likely to leave than those who felt cool toward Trump and perceived considerable support from Trump from their clergy. “The estimates diverge quickly from their convergence in the middle, which suggests that feelings about Trump were quite salient in evangelical congregations. This finding might help us explain why evangelical clergy appear to have had little to say about Trump in their churches

this fall—they were sensitive to these possibilities.” The members most affected by political disagreements tend to be marginal, infrequent attenders.

(*Religion in Public*, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2017/04/11/did-disagreement-over-trump-drive-people-out-of-churches/>)

● **The increasingly negative portrayals of religion in the media has a greater effect on marginal believers than more committed ones, according to recent research.** In his blog *Ahead of the Trend* (April 11), David Briggs reports on research led by Samuel Stroope of Louisiana State University that looked at the relationship between mental health and negative media portrayals based on data from the Baylor Religion Survey. The analysis of 1,714 respondents found that two-thirds say they had been offended by negative portrayals of religion on television, but those less active in their faith reported more adverse reactions. Stroope and colleagues found that “highly religious people were not the ones most affected” by such portrayals of religion, as low levels of congregation attendance, personal prayer, and Bible reading were associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression. But these conditions decreased with higher levels of religious participation and devotion. The highly religious were able to nullify the effects of negative media portrayal, possibly because of the support such believers received in their congregations as well as other protective factors such as a stronger self-image, an expectation of “tribulation” and opposition, and a more forgiving nature.



(*Ahead of the Trend*, <http://blogs.thearda.com>)

● **While intermarriage across generations has reduced the likelihood that children of such marriages will be raised Jewish, Millennial children of intermarriage are substantially more likely than their older counterparts to be raised as Jews and to have received a Jewish education, according to a study in the journal *Contemporary Jewry* (April).** Researchers Theodore Sasson, Janet Krasner Aronson, and Fern Chertok analyze the 2013 Pew Research Center’s survey of Jewish Americans and find that the increase in self-identification is not reflected in higher levels of Jewish behavior among Millennial children of intermarriage in comparison to the behavior of their older counterparts. The authors attribute the increased tendency of intermarried parents to raise



Jewish children to increased outreach by Jewish organizations and a more welcoming approach by Jewish communities to intermarried families.

(*Contemporary Jewry*, <https://link.springer.com/journal/12397>)

● **An analysis from the Pew Research Center shows that higher levels of education *are* linked with lower levels of religious commitment by some measures, including the belief in God, how often people pray, and how important they say religion is to them.** Yet Americans with college degrees report attending religious services as often as Americans with less education. While most religions showed this correlaton between these lower measures of religion and higher rates of education, it did not hold for Christians. The analysis found that Christians with higher levels of education appear to be just as religious as those with less schooling, on average. In fact, highly educated Christians are more likely than less-educated Christians to say they are weekly churchgoers. Among all U.S. adults, college graduates are considerably less likely than those who have less education to say religion is “very important” in their lives: fewer than half of college graduates (46 percent) say so, compared with nearly six-in-ten of those with no more than a high school education (58 percent).

(*This report can be downloaded at:* <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/26/in-america-does-more-education-equal-less-religion>)



● **Although the “hookup culture,” marked by no-strings-attached sexual activity, is reported to have influenced Catholic colleges, the situation is more complicated than that according to a new study.** *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 31) cites the new book *Faith with Benefits: Hookup Culture on Catholic Campuses*, by Jason King, as challenging the previous findings that Catholic colleges have yielded to this trend and show little difference from secular institutions. King conducted surveys at 26 Catholic campuses, with more in-depth interviews carried out at six of them, and found a spectrum of responses to hookup culture. Students on these

campuses did feel the pressure of this new college norm, weighing their own romantic and sexual activities against these expectations. But the Catholic students tended to see their “hooking up” veering more toward casual kissing than sexual intercourse, according to King.



In classifying campuses’ Catholic identity as “very,” “mostly,” or “somewhat” Catholic, King found that only at “mostly” Catholic

schools did students come close to acting out hookup culture. At “very” Catholic institutions, where a countervailing culture of “Catholic evangelicalism” holds sway, students by and large resisted hookup culture; at “somewhat” Catholic campuses, which tend to be nominally Catholic and attract the working class and poor, students also attempted to steer clear of behavior that might jeopardize their progress after graduating. King did not find that there was widespread doubt about the moral authority of church leaders among these students, even with the after-effects of the sexual abuse crisis.

● **For the first time in three years, government restrictions and social hostilities regarding religion increased in 2015, according to Pew Research Center’s most recent annual study on religious freedom.**

The study found that countries with “high” or “very high” levels of government restrictions—in the form of laws, actions, and policies that restrict religious beliefs and practices—moved up from 24 percent in 2014 to 25 percent in 2015. The rise in countries with “high” or “very high” levels of social hostilities against religion by either private individuals or organizations jumped from 23 percent to 27 percent during that same time. When looking at both measures, 40 percent of countries had high or very high levels of restrictions and hostilities against religion. The increase in hostilities reflected such factors as the growth of mob violence related to religion and assaults against individuals. For instance, 17 countries in Europe reported incidents of religion-related mob violence in 2015, up from nine in the previous year. Sub-Saharan Africa saw a spread of violence



to enforce religious norms. Meanwhile, government restrictions were marked by state harassment and use of force against religion, with growth on these two measures in four of the five regions analyzed in the report—the Middle East and North Africa, Asia and the Pacific, sub-Saharan Africa, and Europe.

(This report can be downloaded at: <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/11/global-restrictions-on-religion-rise-modestly-in-2015-reversing-downward-trend/>)

● **There has been a sharp growth of the religiously non-affiliated population in Ireland, but, like everywhere else where this phenomenon has emerged, there is considerable uncertainty about what this trend may mean for belief and religious identity.** In the *Irish Catholic* newspaper (April 13), David Quinn reports that the “nones” in the Census of Ireland numbered 270,000 in 2011 but jumped to 468,000 by 2016—a 73 percent increase. The non-affiliated share of the population is now just under 10 percent, while the people who chose the “Catholic” box declined from 84 percent to 78 percent in five years. The census, which was released in early April, shows that about one-quarter of the nones are immigrants. Quinn writes that the increase shows the growing number of Irish who don’t practice a religion and are now more likely to say they don’t belong to a religion than in the past. Yet like nones elsewhere, the majority—two-thirds— say they believe in God. Quinn concludes that just as there are a la carte Catholics who pick and choose their beliefs and practices, the nones may likewise adopt beliefs and practices that are far removed from atheism.

12 What is your religion?
 Mark one box only

1 Roman Catholic
 2 Church of Ireland
 3 Islam
 4 Presbyterian
 5 Orthodox
 6 Other, write in your RELIGION

7 No religion

(*Irish Catholic*, <http://www.irishcatholic.ie>)

● **Muslim refugees are drawn to churches as social centers and as an opportunity of cultural learning, but there have been few conversions to Christianity, according to a study of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.** In the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (32:2), Kathryn Kraft writes that conversions that do take place among the refugees she studied are more part of a process that involves religious exploration rather than singular decisions or events that will result in a large number of people who will identify as converts. Kraft based her study on six mainly evangelical churches and NGOs and clergy, staff workers, and 21 Syrian beneficiaries of such ministries in 2014. When the churches opened social ministries to refugees, they also witnessed a sharp growth of Muslim refugees attending church services. Kraft found that some attended for social reasons, such as to ensure that they would receive aid, but several reported finding spiritual value in the services, claiming that they did not find support and comfort in mosques.

There was a minority of refugees who made full-fledged conversions to the church and Christianity. But even those who did not formally convert and remained Muslim told stories that resembled accounts of conversion. The beneficiaries wanted to learn more about Christianity on a cultural level and found seeing women in leadership in the services especially empowering. Refugees saw churches as “safe spaces” and community centers to such an extent that staffers themselves began to describe congregations in such a manner or hold their social services outside of church buildings. Kraft concludes that although few of the refugees in the study “will ever call themselves Christian, many may to some extent be described as anonymous Christians or people who have somehow experienced a lasting change in their hearts, even though their engagement with Christianity is only a passing aspect of their wider experience of displacement and their loyalty remain with their Muslim community.” (*Journal of Contemporary Religion*, <http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cjcr20/current>)



FEATURES:

Saudi-funded mosque building in Bangladesh raises concern about extremism

Following last year's visit of Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to Saudi Arabia, the Saudi Kingdom has agreed to finance the building of 560 "model mosques," evoking mixed feelings among Muslim groups who do not share the Saudi Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. *Dhaka Tribune* (April 20) reports that these mosques will be equipped with libraries and accommodation for foreign guests and are expected to provide primary education to more than 150,000 children. The estimated cost, for which Saudi Arabia will provide the lion's share, should be more than \$1 billion. The representative of a Sufi federation sees no need for new mosques and expressed concerns that they could primarily become channels for the propagation of Wahhabism, at the very time there are growing concerns in Bangladesh about the spread of extremist views of Islam.

This news comes after the Bangladeshi Prime Minister has conceded that the government would recognize degrees from madrassas (Islamic schools), thus paving the way for religious scholars to qualify for public service jobs. In an article published by *La Croix International* (April 29), Malo Tresca sees this move as the continuation of a strategy pursued over the past 50 years for spreading Wahhabism. Last year French researcher Pierre Conesa published a book on Saudi Arabia's religious diplomacy, describing a combination of state institutions, private foundations, and Islamic universities engaged in religious soft power (*Middle East Eye*, March 16). Scholarships allow young people from many Islamic countries to train in Saudi Arabia and then to propagate Saudi religious views in different parts of the world.



Findings & Footnotes

■ The current issue of the journal *Religion and American Culture* (Winter, 2017) features a 53-page section on “Studying Religion in the Age of Trump,” bringing together a wide range of prominent scholars to weigh in on this contested topic. Judging by the contributions, the election of Donald Trump has upset the theories and paradigms held by many scholars for understanding religion and politics in general and the Religious Right in particular. Historian Anthea Butler captures the tone and sentiment of many, writing, “The election of Donald Trump to the presidency has destroyed my thinking about evangelicals and political action and has given credence to what I knew in my gut: that our definition of ‘evangelical’ whether based in beliefs, politics, or behavior was wrong. ...we will need basically to scrap what we think we know about the ‘culture wars’ and deal with another trajectory altogether, one that takes seriously that the term ‘Religious Right’ not only includes white evangelicals, but whites who come out of these other iterations of Pentecostal-like movements, including prosperity gospel. We will have to take seriously the issue of race and racism at the core of how evangelicalism is constructed....”

Several articles take note of the prosperity gospel—whether in Trump’s own biography or in the circle of charismatic preachers that supported him during his campaign—and how the movement may have political implications that have been understudied. Northwestern University’s Robert Orsi provides a provocative essay on white working-class Catholics and how reactions to Trump revealed long-simmering cleavages within parishes and families and between genders and generations. He adds that as a catalyzing figure, Trump brought to the surface the “hidden injuries” of the Catholic working class, including its “religious damages,” where, after Vatican II, “decisions about how they would pray...what they could and could not do in church, and whether there would be a statue of the Blessed Mother for them to address their petitions were all made by newly empowered middle-class and upper-class lay elites in alliance with priests who would rather associate with prosperous rather than working-class parishioners.” Other contributions focus on the “Alt-Right” and its religious diversity (including Neo-Pagans) and how immigration has become a new point of conflict among American religious groups. For more information on this issue, visit: <http://rac.ucpress.edu>.

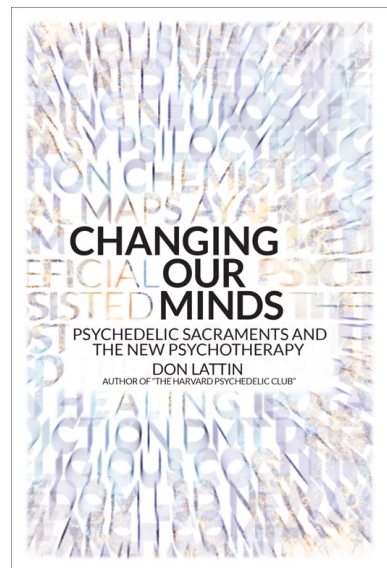


■ The complex relationship between Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam in Russia is the theme of the current issue of the journal *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* (28:2). The articles in this issue don't so much look at official relations between the two religions in the form of joint statements from leaders of organizations and interfaith efforts as much as the informal culture and networks of intellectuals, politicians, clerics, mosques, and churches that overlap and often conflict in contemporary



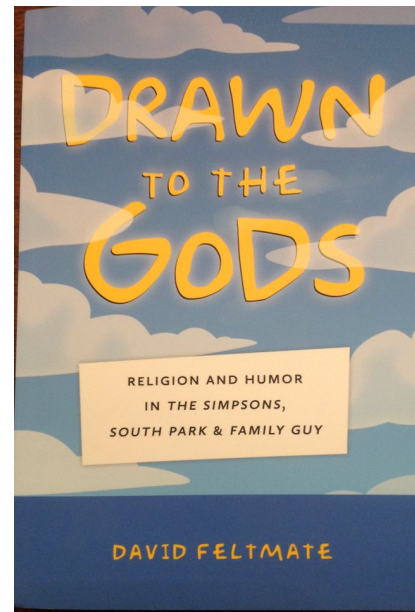
Russia. The editors note that even with the important differences in size (Russian Orthodoxy embraces some 150 million believers; Islam reaches just about 20 million) and shape (a unitary Russian Orthodox church, versus Islam that is fragmented into 70 local, regional, and national organizations often in competition with each other), there is considerable interaction and even some conversions taking place between these traditions. Islam is designated a “traditional” religion by Russia, but several articles discuss how this status limits and delineates the religion, leading to an entrepreneurial approach among Muslims. Noteworthy articles include a look at how Islam is being “Russified” in culture and language and studies of different conversion movements of both Orthodox and Muslims, even though the state officially discourages proselytism between the religions. Another article shows how a group of “Islam-critical journalists” has sought to rally the Russian Orthodox Church to target and denounce official and independent Muslim authorities as adherents of “Wahhabism,” which is a strict, Saudi-based form of the faith. For more on this issue, visit: <http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cicm20/current>

■ Don Lattin’s new book *Changing Our Minds: Psychedelic Sacraments and the New Psychotherapy* (Synergetic Press, \$23.95) documents the new wave of users experimenting with mind-altering substances, such as LSD, Ecstasy, and ayahuasca, and the role these substances are playing in psychology and spirituality. Fifty years after the “summer of love” when psychedelics first became popularized, the scientists, mystics, and seekers are rehabilitating experimentation and research of these drugs, hoping to tame the excesses that surrounded them in the 1960s and 1970s. Lattin visits labs and talks with scientists on the cutting edge of research about the use of psychoactive substances to treat depression and other mental illnesses, as well as the increasing number of practitioners treating patients, sometimes in underground clinics (due to these drugs’ illegality). People are also using psychedelics as a “dress rehearsal for death,” in some cases actually taking them while in the dying process. Many users—especially cancer patients—report that their fear of death is alleviated, which often leads to spiritual experiences or interest regarding the possibilities of life after death. Lattin fleshes out the story with interesting accounts of people’s experiences with these substances and his attempt to find an alternative method of treatment for his own depression.



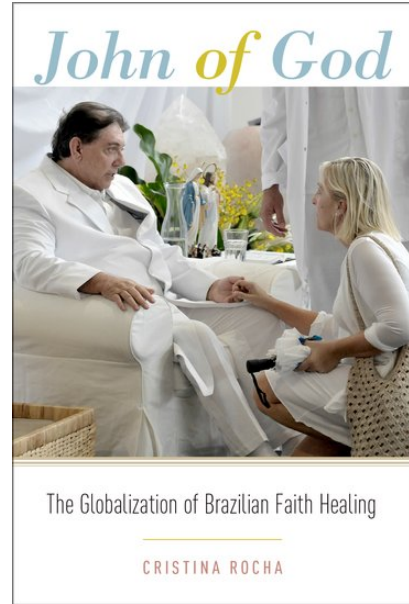
Although sympathetic to the new psychedelic turn, Lattin reports fairly on this emergent and divided subculture split between hedonists, scientific rationalists, and spiritualists. Especially interesting is his in-depth look at the spiritual entrepreneurs who are trying to usher in this revolution, pending the drugs' legalization and legitimization—if psychedelics follow the trajectory of marijuana's growing acceptance. It's noteworthy that such psychedelic-spiritual seekers and promoters—and Lattin himself—rarely use the term “hallucinogenic” to describe these substances; they consider these experiences as spiritually real. Such proponents support a theory of the mind that views these substances as allowing one's brain and consciousness to experience, or tune in (like with an antenna) to, spiritual forces. There is also considerable therapeutic influence in psychedelic spirituality, with guides and counselors typically helping to process and interpret the user's spiritual experience. Aspects of Eastern religions are most often linked with psychedelic spirituality, although Latin American shamanism has grown in popularity thanks to the growing use and promotion of ayahuasca. Lattin reports that researchers still find it difficult to find Christian or Jewish clergy to volunteer for psychedelic drug trials (like they did in the first phase of drug trials 50 years ago); when pioneering psychedelic researcher and spiritual teacher Rick Strassman moved from incorporating Hindu and Buddhist teachings to using the Hebrew Bible, he met resistance and protests that it is “too religious.”

■ *Drawn to the Gods* (NYU Press, \$28), by sociologist David Feltmate, focuses on animated pop culture to weigh in on big questions like the place of religion in public life and the nature and roles of religious satire and religious illiteracy in the U.S. Feltmate analyzes the popular and long-running animated shows *South Park*, *Family Guy*, and *The Simpsons*, where, respectively, 78 percent, 84 percent, and 95 percent of episodes contain explicit references to religion. But unlike other analysts and critics, Feltmate doesn't view these shows as equal-opportunity offenders or satirists of religions but rather argues that they operate from their own “sacred centers” or quasi-religious worldviews that support some faiths and condemn others. Institutional religion and its supposed hypocrisy and non-progressive views of life is an obvious target of these shows, using what the author calls “ignorant familiarity” (appealing to the audiences' basic illiteracy based on a common stock of knowledge) to find wide appeal. While spirituality receives less satirical treatment, religions tend to be judged harshly in each show according to different criteria; *The Simpsons* upholds a spiritual individualism guided by ethics and scientific rationality, while *South Park* venerates the free and creative individual, and in *Family Guy* an “anti-religious orthodoxy” is firmly in place.



“American Christianity” broadly understood (or misunderstood) preoccupies the attention of these shows' writers and producers, as they portray churches, clergy, and their members as irrelevant and backward in their views on morality and everyday life. Evangelical Christianity is particularly mocked—personified by the character of Ned Flanders in *The Simpsons*, though the other two shows use outright sacrilege and blasphemy to make their points. Feltmate concludes that the superficial and stereotypical portrayals of religion in these shows pose risk in pluralistic America. In the end, both the religions satirized and the shows' creators are involved in “religious work” as they seek to promote their very different ideas of the sacred. He concludes that religious satire can perform a civic function if both parties acknowledge their own sacred visions and engage in intelligent criticism based on a common humanity.

■ Starting as a local healer in Brazil, John of God (João de Deus, b. João Teixeira de Faria in 1942) has become an international star. This medium healer attracts many people from the West to Abadãnia, a town of 17,000 inhabitants in the southwestern Brazilian state of Goiás. John of God has also travelled abroad since the 2000s. Cristina Rocha (Western Sydney University) has been researching his followers for ten years and has now written what is the first ethnographic account of this international movement, *John of God: The Globalization of Brazilian Faith Healing* (Oxford University Press, \$29.95). Raised in poverty with little school training and a tailor by profession, John of God is reported to have become aware of his healing power by the age of 16. He is said to incorporate “The Entity” (actually various entities, one spirit at a time). The healing is conducted either invisibly or by visible operations: “They may have their skin cut with a scalpel, have their eyes scraped with a kitchen knife, or have surgical scissors inserted into their nostrils,” all “without asepsis or anesthetics,” reportedly without pain or infections. The Entity is supposed to be able to see their energy fields and past lives.



Neither John of God nor The Entity offers teachings, Rocha notes, but visitors tend to be familiar with New Age worldviews as diffused today in popular culture. Some of the visitors are also followers of Indian gurus or other teachings. Not unlike those of many other Brazilians, John of God’s beliefs are syncretic. He claims to have a universal approach and not to preach any religion, but the background reveals Catholic (healing sessions start with Catholic prayers), Kardecist Spiritist, and Umbandist (a mix of Spiritism and Afro-Brazilian religions) features. Kardecist Spiritism (i.e. French Spiritism as codified by Allan Kardec and appropriated by Brazilian audiences) has been present in Brazil since the 19th century, and direct affiliation to it has been growing in Brazil (from 1 percent of the population in 1991 to 2 percent in 2010, plus people who are nominally Catholic and do not regard Spiritism as a religion). There are clear signs that a community has been born around John of God, with weddings and baptisms increasingly practiced at the Casa, as the center of the movement is known.

People get baptized in order to be closer to the entities and protected by them or to show their commitment to them. People also meet in their home countries, attempting to reproduce what they experienced in Brazil (including music, rituals, prayers in Portuguese, and food). People dress in white, as they would at the Casa. People also read books or watch DVDs about John of God, considering these practices as ways to open the body to healing. Based on her observations, Rocha suggests that this pattern demonstrates how New Age inspiration, despite porous and fluid beliefs, can create community. She emphasizes John of God and his movement as one more example of the South as a source of global flows. Regarding the future, although John of God and his much younger wife had a baby in 2015, there are concerns about his health and longevity. He has not delivered teachings that can be immortalized in books, Rocha observes. While the place could become a pilgrimage spot for people looking for healing energy once John of God passes from the scene, another possible scenario is that some of his followers will turn toward other Brazilian healers who could offer them hope—and maybe also give rise to communities.

On/File: A Continuing Record of Movements, People, Events, and Groups Impacting Religion

1) **St. Matthew's Catholic Church** in Charlotte, North Carolina, is likely the largest parish in the U.S., and much of its growth is intentional and based on the evangelical megachurch model. The parish, with 10,000 registered households, grew from 237 families 30 years ago and mirrors the rapid growth of Charlotte in recent decades. The church looked outside the Catholic tradition for its expansive and welcoming ministry, particularly since studies have shown that only a quarter of parishes seat 1,000 people or more, turning to Rick Warren's Saddleback megachurch in California. The parish's use of small group ministry especially draws on the megachurch model, though with a difference. Unlike their Protestant counterparts, Sunday homilies at St. Matthew's are based on the week's Scripture reading and are too brief to generate small group discussion. Instead, parishioners sign up to watch videos that lead to discussions in the small groups. As with many other megachurches, the parish has recently opened a satellite church 10 miles away to serve families with small children who may have difficulty making the drive to the main campus. This practice allows for the establishment of a new ministry without the costly duplication of infrastructure, especially with the clergy shortage. (Source: *America*, May 1).



2) **Pure Flix**, a faith-based entertainment production and distribution company, is seeking a corner of the market dominated by giants such as Netflix in its recently established on-demand streaming service. The Scottsdale, Arizona, based company has produced popular Christian and inspirational programming such as *God's Not Dead* and *The Encounter*, a series about people who are visited by Jesus, and *The American Bible Challenge* game show hosted by Jeff Foxworthy. The company has recently premiered its newest film *The Case for Christ* about a journalist investigating Christian claims in 1970s America. As of March, pureflix.com had nearly 715,000 visitors and a subscription base of 250,000 viewers. On-demand services allow Christians of different denominations and traditions to find content that caters to their individual interests and beliefs—a narrow casting approach not amenable to a theatrical feature film. At the same

time, Pure Flix executives are building a strategy to draw a secular audience and to make content that moves beyond “preaching to the conservative.” (Source: *New York Times*, April 23)

