

The Many Faces of Religion | BY RUBEN SANCHEZ

Religion is a Commodity

"I turned from phraseology to reality." This is Dietrich Bonhoeffer (left) reflecting on the time he spent in Harlem, New York City, during the 1930s, in the midst of the black congregation of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, while studying at Union Theological Seminary under Reinhold Niebuhr. "There's no theology here," he said, referring to Union. Rather, his short time in



Manhattan brought him life-changing experiences, friends, and music from the dispossessed that he would take back to soon-to-be Nazi Germany: Negro spirituals.

The black church of Harlem introduced the white Bonhoeffer to a gospel new to him, a gospel in which Jesus is black, angels are black, people are black, and all of them are the victims of social injustices. Out of positions of privilege, and in the midst of people condemned by a socioeconomic system that made legal distinctions based on color, leaving their descendants with less socioeconomic opportunities today, Bonhoeffer started to see things "from below." His Christian experience would never be the same.

It is now late July 2012. On a Wednesday evening, we, a heterogeneous group of ministers and religion scholars mainly affiliated with Christianity, along with an embedded journalist from the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), arrive at the same church

where Bonhoeffer used to teach Sunday school, Abyssinian Baptist Church (below).¹ There, we find a line of white tourists from all over the world, waiting to experience a black Christian service. Among our group, a tall black woman stands out. A former Episcopal priest, recently defrocked because of her dual affiliation with Christianity and Islam, her skin color buys her a first-class ticket to skip the line and be the first to enter the temple. She refuses the invitation because she is now and for the next two days part of the first group to attend Abrahamic Manhattan, a three-day immersion into Abrahamic communities present in the Big Apple. The program is organized by Faith House Manhattan, a nonprofit entity whose mission is to help New Yorkers experience their neighbor's faith.

It is with this in mind that we accommodate ourselves on the church's pews. We have entered in rigorous order, and have been guided to our seats by immaculate deaconesses with gloved hands. I look around and see at least a



LEFT: WWW.ACTION.ORG; RIGHT: WWW.POST-GAZETTE.COM

hundred people ready for the service. Since more than three-quarters of them are tourists, the only way for us to remember that we are in a black church is by looking at the black musicians that fill the pulpit. Then it feels like being inside one of many movies with gospel music, exported by Hollywood all around the world.

After the music, the Reverend Violet L. Dease



Lee (left), “the first and only woman to serve as Assistant Pastor and the first woman to preside over the ordination in Abyssinian’s 204 years of Christian witness,”—and also, according to the church’s website, the only one out of three serving ministers with a PhD—preaches the word.

“Have you taken a sabbatical from your TV or Facebook?” she asks rhetorically, making the importance of rest the core of her message. “Resting is a courageous act in the world we live in,” she says.

However, despite the fact that Rev. Lee is a woman, black, and has experience in social work, and despite the fact that gentrification in Harlem is causing pain for its poorer black inhabitants, many of whom are forced to move out, none of the social justice spirit that shook Bonhoeffer’s life and helped him stand against the Nazis surfaced in her inspirational words.

The sermon ends, and black gospel music fills the church again. Tourists are encouraged to make a donation, and so they do. Finally, the music comes to an end. We all feel good, full of energy. We have experienced a black service in a marvelous church in the heart of world-famous Harlem.

What happened to the spirit that moved Bonhoeffer? Where were those words of longing for justice that would later inform Bonhoeffer’s works and the creation of the Confessing Church? What made this experience different for the tourists present, distinct from any other activity that one can enjoy in NYC?

“The black church is the result of systemic

oppression on black people,” the very same defrocked black Episcopal priest who was offered preferential treatment, told us. Self-described as a writer and musician, she also holds a PhD in Christian Testament, and was a seminary professor. Nowadays, she added, “black culture has been commodified and co-opted.”

Religion is Alive

Experiencing your neighbor’s faith is easier when someone guides you, because as Henry D. Thoreau said, “It’s not what you look at that matters, it’s what you see.” Faith House Manhattan’s founder and president of the board, Samir Selmanovic (below), and then-executive director,



Bowie Snodgrass, lent us their eyes to see some of the religious richness that Manhattan contains.

They arranged several visits to Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities for us; Abyssinian Baptist Church was only our first stop. Ahead lay a tour in a museum that is a synagogue on Saturdays, blurring the line between church and state; a mass delivered at fast-food tempo in the Wall Street area; a visit to the famous “Ground Zero mosque”; two very different ways of worshipping Allah; and to close, one of the most festive ways of entering Shabbat that I have ever experienced: a service in a synagogue that Selmanovic described as “orthodox and postmodern.”

This accounts for only a very small fraction of the unending religious diversity one can find in Manhattan. According to the 2010 statistics from the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), out of the city’s total population of 1,585,873, there were 698,097 religious adherents, distributed among more than ninety religious bodies, such as Reconstructionist Judaism and the Mennonite Church USA; within sixteen defined families, such as Baptists and Holiness churches, plus many other undefined families; and all of them comprised within five

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traditions, like the Black Protestant and Orthodox traditions, and still many others also undefined. Two religious bodies that pertain to an undefined family and tradition are Buddhists and Hindus. ARDA recognizes two types of the former and four of the latter.²

Believing that simply labeling communities and classifying them by family is enough to know what the different religious communities are all about can be as risky as believing that all Republicans only care about abortion and gay marriage. As Selmanovic writes in his illuminating book, *It's Really All About God: How Islam, Atheism, and Judaism Made Me a Better Christian*, "Religions are alive."³ And with life comes the unexpected.

Religion is Secular

Thursday morning begins in the Lower East Side, where Chinatown is and Little Italy used to be more than just the touristy place with no Italians that it is now. There, we visit a National Historical Landmark hard to define in one word. From 1887 until 2008, it was the Eldridge Street Synagogue. For four years now, it has been the Museum at Eldridge Street (*below*). However, both names are still suit-



able today. From Sunday through Friday until 3 p.m., the building is open as a museum to a broad public from many backgrounds, for a general admission fee of ten dollars. On Friday evening and Saturday, the building becomes a synagogue only open to a Jewish Orthodox community.

According to its website, the Museum at Eldridge Street is the result of a restoration project that lasted over twenty years and raised more than \$18 million, which came from the city of New York (\$6 million), New York State, the federal government, corporations, foundations, and thou-

sands of supporters from around the country. Public money transformed a centenarian synagogue in ruins into a splendid, must-see museum.

We enter the building, and for the first and last time in our Abrahamitic Immersion, we find no community and no



neighbor whose faith we can experience. Instead, a young lady guides us through the vestibule, the sanctuary, and the women's balcony. We admire the stained glass panels, the Rose Window, the East Window—and the lighting, while our guide explains to us some of the building's history and its meaning for the Jewish community that immigrated to New York City in the nineteenth century.

We walk freely around the building and admire its beauty, but we do not experience what Selmanovic calls "holy awkwardness," i.e., being present during another's experience of his or her holy sites or objects.

Does this mean we had no "religious experience" at all in the museum? A good answer to this question does not have so much to do with experiencing our neighbor's faith, in this case, Judaism, as with experiencing our own beliefs. And not so much with our religious beliefs, like Adventism, but with our beliefs regarding the Western world we live in, which somehow hold all of us, "believers and nonbelievers," Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and many others, together: the religion of the secular.

With the help of Finbarr Barry Flood (*above*), humanities professor at the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University, and the social anthropologist Alfred Gell, who died in 1997, I would like to briefly argue that our visit to this synagogue-museum was indeed a "religious experience." A religious experience that, ironically, because of the secular worldview that sustains our understanding and definition of religion, we would never consider as such.

Flood affirms that the creation of the secular institution of the museum marks the "shift from cult to culture." He uses the word *cult* not in the sense of an abnormal religious movement, but as a system of ritual practices. This shift so crucial to the birth of modernity means a scientific outlook on how the very same humans can produce such different belief systems, rituals, and so on. Thanks to this scientific move, "religious artifacts" become "art." Thus, the new museum is to the secular world what the

temple was to the premodern world.⁴

In his book *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Gell wrote,

*I cannot tell between religious and aesthetic exaltation; art-lovers, it seems to me, actually do worship images in most of the relevant senses, and explain away their de facto idolatry by rationalizing it as aesthetic awe. Thus, to write about art at all is, in fact, to write about either religion, or the substitute of religion which those who have abandoned the outward forms of received religions content themselves with.*⁵

Religion is Politics

Our next stop is St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church (*below*), New York's oldest Catholic



parish. It is located in the financial district, so close to Ground Zero that during the 9/11 attacks, a portion of the landing gear of an airplane damaged its roof.

Mass starts on time, and things go more quickly than any of us could anticipate. I have never heard a pastor preach this fast. It feels like the father of the parish is late for an appointment. "People come here on their lunch breaks, so we have to make it happen in thirty minutes," says the father, after the service.

At St. Peter's, we found a group of people that reflected the surrounding area's diversity, not only racially, but also financially. In a city like New York, where economic inequality has reached the levels of some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the Wall Street area is where one can sense the differences the most.⁶ Inside St. Peter's, however, these differences are very easy to forget. We all line up to receive the host from the same father. There is no first-class ticket here,

neither an organic nor whole-grain host sold at a more expensive price.

The father tells us to go in peace, and we sing the benediction. While it is still sinking in that the service has ended, the father comes straight to us and asks, "Are you the Faith House group?"

Selmanovic has organized a time for us to get to know Father Kevin Madigan (*below*) in person. The latter explains to us that St. Peter's is a very traditional church, and that when the World Trade Center was here, the church was packed.

Selmanovic takes this chance to explain that Faith House Manhattan and St. Peter's together organized a peaceful march to show support for our next stop, the Ground Zero mosque, as the Islamic community center became known during the summer 2010 controversy, although it is as far from the actual Ground Zero as St. Peter's, and is not a mosque, but a community center.

As Father Madigan reported to *The New York Times*, Catholics experienced the very same hate and rejection when they were planning to build St. Peter's Catholic Church, back in the 1780s.⁷ US Protestants, seeing the Pope as the enemy of democracy, forced the 200 Catholics then in the city to build their church outside the city limits. Not happy with that, twenty years later Protestants surrounded the building, disrupted the service, and in the disturbances that followed, one policeman was killed. This is why in a letter Father Madigan wrote to his parish-



ioners, it read that "[m]any of the charges being leveled at Muslim-Americans today are the same as those once leveled at our forebears." For Father Madigan, Catholics have a special obligation to make sure such discrimination does not take place again.

Over two hundred years have passed, and Catholics have not only become the second largest religious tradition, according to the Association of Religion Data Archives, but even put a Catholic in the White House.⁸ However, reli-

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gious discrimination is still with us. Now the “bad guy” is not the Pope but Osama Bin Laden (until he died), and “bad people” are not Catholics but Muslims. “People threw pieces of ham at me [during her school years],” says the young lady who guides us around the Ground Zero mosque, once we left St. Peter’s. Crying, she recalls how a glass bottle had also been thrown at her.

The young lady explains that at this community center, they host a variety of programs that range from lessons in capoeira (a “dancelike martial art of Brazil”) to history classes such as “The Genealogy of Muslims in America,” in which students learn that Muslims were among the first to set foot on this land. They were brought as slaves.

She also gives us a different interpretation of Islam than the definition that the general media tend to spread. Islam is a way of life for her. And although for many, jihad is a holy war against infidels, for her, and for some Muslims in the United States, jihad refers to inner struggles we all face when confronted with doubts and difficulties in life.

Again, Faith House Manhattan’s project to make us experience our neighbor’s faith proved to be more than right; the encounter was indispensable. We took away many things from our visit to the Catholic church and the Islamic community center. Yet to me, none of them was as important as the realization that this country fancies itself as a place for religious freedom precisely because it is not. From the rejection Catholics experienced in 1785, to the New York City Police Department spying on Muslims in New York and New Jersey just last year, many other religious groups have faced discrimination and hate throughout the past two centuries.¹⁰ “We the People,” a short video produced by a coalition of nonprofits for the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, shows how far we still are from truly respecting the First Amendment.¹¹

Religion is Diversity

It is Thursday night, but before we go home to rest, religion will still make us sing and dance.



After 10 p.m., we enter a Sufi mosque located in the Manhattan neighborhood of Tribeca, a fashionable and very desirable district that is home to several celebrities. Inside, we find a small community with many young people, some of them white, led by a female imam, Shaikha Fariha (left).

We take off our shoes and sit on the floor of a small prayer hall. Close to the quiblah, the wall that faces Mecca, there are big pieces of sheepskin where members sit.

What we are about to experience is the dhikr, a devotional service to remember or invoke God. We start by singing several songs, moving our heads from right to left, in an effort to bring our attention to the heart, where, according to the Quran, God dwells. After a while, we stand up, hold hands, and sing a repetitive song, moving our bodies in a defined and also repetitive manner. Each word uttered in a chant is a name of God, and each motion has a symbolic meaning. Meanwhile, some members chant different songs. We do more collective dances and movements before we break up and start whirling, following the music’s rhythm and melody. We turn counterclockwise, as though embracing our hearts, where their Beloved dwells. We raise our right hands with open palms to receive the blessings from God, and lower our left hands, blessing the earth.

Exhausted, we leave the mosque before many of its members, who will still continue looking for God in their mystic way.

This late-night, emotional, and full-of-action Muslim worship service is a sharp contrast to what we encounter the next day, Friday afternoon, at a Harlem mosque of the Islamic Brotherhood (not to be confused with the Muslim Brotherhood). According to Selmanovic, the worship center (top, page 45) was founded by a Malcolm X follower with a very progressive view of gender equality. Also countering the stereotypes of many, the founder and imam is very much against war, and works for social justice.

The mosque does not have a coed prayer hall. Women and men worship one floor apart. Still, a conscious effort is made to ensure that all events and speaking are directed toward both genders, not only the men.

We again sit on the ground, but do not stand up and dance. On the contrary, we kneel and bow to the point where our noses touch the floor. We do not sing, either. It is the imam (far right, above) who speaks, appealing to our reason—and our hearts—and the only thing close to music that we hear is the call to prayer.

Finally, we note that the Muslims of this community are of African descent. “Not all Arabs are Muslims,” said Selmanovic, in one of the immersion’s several debriefing sessions, held in Bonhoeffer’s room at Union Theological Seminary. “Also, there is an Arab Christian church in NYC. In fact, the majority of Muslims are not Arabs. There is as

much diversity within Islam as there is diversity in Christianity. It is unfortunate that Christians have low religious literacy of other religions," he adds. In the Abrahamic Immersion's introductory session, Snodgrass had already reminded us that no religion is monolithic.



"There is more diversity of Muslims in NYC than anywhere else in the world," she explained.

It is quite easy to be aware of the religious diversity present in the United States. Our understanding of religious freedom implies that there are at least two religions from which to choose. In addition, many not-for-profit organizations focused on interfaith work or dialogue are living proof that not everyone is affiliated with the same religious community. The state protects this type of diversity, and thus we are all called to at least tolerate it.

However, when it comes to the distinct communities found within the same religion, it is not clear anymore for some of us if this is "diversity" or "difference." But when the spectrum belongs to a religious community foreign to us, instead of seeing the rainbow we experience at home, the most we perceive are one or two colors that are usually painted by the mass media.

Faith House Manhattan's Abrahamic Immersion provides this extra step. It confronts us with our stereotypes, and very empirically shows us how, under the same sacred canopy, there are distinct communities that worship what all consider to be the same God. This realization can be so paradigm shattering that questions such as, "What is a Jew?" become very difficult to answer.

Our last religious experience reaffirms the point. In a Presbyterian church, we welcome the Sabbath with a Jewish renewal community that Selmanovic defines as both "orthodox" and "postmodern." The people that make up this community are a blend of "old-school"-type members and hipsters.

During the service, we sing, we clap, and we dance. It is a combination of traditional liturgy

with now in-vogue practices such as meditation. The rabbi asks us to close our eyes and reflect on our inner state. Since this community is very much about integrating body, mind, and soul, he makes us embody the Shabbat and release our tensions of the week. Indeed, it is a very refreshing experience quite different from our time at the museum-synagogue. As a Seventh-day Adventist, experiencing different uses of the body during worship with Sufis and this Jewish community has opened up a space for reflection on our bodies in the church, and added meaning and insight to Luke 10:27 (MSG), "That you love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence."

At the beginning of November, Faith House Manhattan announced the creation of Faith House Institute. The program draws on this pilot experience to offer not only Abrahamic Immersions but also immersions in any set of religious communities in New York City, tailored to organizations, groups, and congregations. The ways in which this can enrich religious people are quite in tune with Selmanovic's book, *It's Really All About God*. Getting to know other religious traditions through their followers has the potential to give us new insights about our own religious identity.



At the same time, for those who don't consider themselves religious, this immersion can be a special window into our very human condition. Because, as Selmanovic told us, after an entire lifetime in the midst of religious diversity, "It all comes down to human beings and a God we cannot own. You can never box in anybody, nei-

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Ruben Sanchez is a Fulbright scholar who holds a master's degree in religious studies and journalism from New York University. He was raised in Spain and moved to New York in 2010. He is currently working as the university chaplain for Seventh-day Adventist students attending colleges and universities in the New York City area.



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