BELIEVERS:
SKETCHES OF FAITH IN AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

ERIK HOLMES: Believers: Sketches of Faith in America
(Under the direction of Chris Roush, Barbara Friedman and Justin Catanoso)

Despite a wide variety of excellent reporting on religion in the mainstream media, there is a strong perception among audiences and journalists alike that the media generally do a worse job covering religion than other subjects. Reporters often have a lack of knowledge about the religions they cover and focus too often on scandal and controversy about religious leaders and organizations. The emphasis on conflict as a news value also leads reporters to focus on controversy at the expense of faith and spirituality. The purpose of this study is to build on the work of the best religion reporters by focusing on the role of faith in the lives of ordinary but diverse Americans. To do so, this series of three articles will profile an Egyptian-American family, members of a Christian church rebuilding after Hurricane Katrina, and a Hare Krishna follower.
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INTRODUCTION

Religion has emerged as the main front in America’s culture wars, a heated battle waged by politicians, pundits, bloggers and zealots lusting for control of the cultural landscape (“Faith Czar,” 2004; Kainz, 2006; Steinfels, 2006). The bloodless confrontations pit liberal against conservative, Democrat against Republican, and, perhaps most fundamentally, religious against secular. Nowhere is the rallying cry more clearly articulated than in an April 2005 speech by Judge Janice Rogers Brown, then a nominee and now a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit:

There seems to have been no time since the Civil War that this country was so bitterly divided. It’s not a shooting war, but it is a war. … These are perilous times for people of faith. Not in the sense that we are going to lose our lives, but in the sense that it will cost you something if you are a person of faith who stands up for what you believe in and say those things out loud (as cited in Lewis, 2005).

Such passionate comments indicate the sincerity of the combatants’ convictions. Those who propagate the culture wars from both the right and the left believe the country has been polarized into two irreconcilable factions—the Christian right intent on injecting their faith and beliefs into the public realm, and the secular left who want to remove all indications of faith from public life (Podesta, 2005).

Both of these rhetorical villains are caricatures, of course. Most Christian conservatives are not Bible-thumping zealots intent of forcing their views on others, just
as most secular liberals are not undercover communists eager to fill out God’s death certificate. Most Americans fall somewhere in the middle—and closer to the center than to the extremes (Pew Forum, 2007). Unfortunately, this vast religious center seems to have disappeared from the conversation.

Or maybe they just can’t be heard above all the shouting. As the talk of a culture war has grown more and more heated, some in the media have found it easier to report on Rick Warren’s stance on homosexuality or the Rev. Jeremiah Wright’s controversial sermons than to explore the subtle, complex and considerably less provocative issues of faith and belief. Thus, some media coverage is complicit in allowing one of society’s most important and enduring issues to be high-jacked by the margins. This study seeks to leave the vitriol behind and explore the role of faith in the lives of ordinary Americans.

**Literature Review**

**Religion in America**

A great deal has been written about religion in the United States from the perspectives of a variety of disciplines throughout the social sciences. No attempt to summarize this enormous field of inquiry will be made here. For the purposes of this project, a snapshot of the state of religion in America and the primary currents in academic work will suffice.

The United States has always been a profoundly religious nation, and many scholars argue that America is, in fact, the most religious of the world’s industrial
democracies (Kosmin & Lachman, 1993). While most industrial democracies tend to become less religious as their societies mature, the United States has bucked this trend and remains highly religious. A 2007 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (2008) found that 83 percent of Americans affiliate themselves with a religious faith. A survey conducted in 2004 by Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found that 81 percent of respondents said prayer was an important part of their lives, and 87 percent said they have never doubted God’s existence (as cited in Beckerman, 2004). While church attendance figures are hard to pin down, most experts and public surveys estimate that around 25 percent of Americans attend religious services regularly, down from about 40 percent in the 1960s (Chaves, 2004). The 2007 Pew survey, however, found that 40 percent of respondents reported attending services at least once a week (Pew Forum, 2008). The picture of American faith in the early 21st century, then, is one in which a high percentage of the public profess an unwavering belief in God and affiliate themselves with a religion, with a lesser percentage attending services regularly.

In the United States, the functional unit of organized religion is the religious congregation, which may take the form of a Christian church, Jewish synagogue or Muslim mosque, among others. Despite the decline in attendance at religious services, sociologists Stanley Presser and Mark Chaves (2007) argue that congregations remain the most influential and pervasive cultural institution in the United States. Chaves (2004) defines a congregation as a “social institution in which individuals gather in physical proximity to one another, frequently and at regularly scheduled intervals, for activities and events with explicitly religious content and purpose, and in which there is continuity over time in the individuals who gather, the location of a gathering, and the nature of the
activities and events at each gathering” (pp. 1-2). Kosmin and Lachman (1993) argue that it is the social connections that churches provide that make them such important institutions in American life.

Chaves (2004) provided by far the most complete picture of what American congregations look like and what they do by incorporating the 1998 National Congregations Survey into the biennial General Social Survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. The study found that worship is the focal point of congregational life, with 99 percent of congregations offering at least one worship service per week. Each congregation’s regular worship service consists of a repertoire of items drawn from a line-up of standard elements: organ music, choir singing, communion, reciting creeds, kneeling, sermons, scriptural readings, speaking in tongues and many others. Two of these items—singing by the congregation and a sermon—are nearly universal, with more than 95 percent of congregations using these elements. Worship services last an average of 70 minutes, including a sermon lasting an average of 20 minutes. Also, around 90 percent of congregations offer religious education classes. The National Congregations Survey reveals that, despite considerable diversity in worship practices among American congregations, there are a number of common elements in each that most worshipers would recognize.

Chaves (2004) also found in the 1998 National Congregations Survey that congregations tend to be socially homogeneous, with members and attendees drawn from the same or similar socio-economic groups. But a recent trend appears to be increasing diversity. Chaves and Anderson (2008) found in the 2006-07 National Congregations Survey follow-up that predominantly white congregations—which 63 percent of the
respondents said they attended—were significantly more ethnically diverse than in the 1998 survey. The number of respondents who said their congregations had no Latinos decreased from 43 percent in 1998 to 36 percent in 2006-07, and the number with no recent immigrants decreased from 61 percent to 49 percent. Chaves and Anderson argue that these trends toward increasing demographic diversity mirror those in the United States as a whole.

Like other aspects of American life, religion in the United States is characterized by a growing pluralism. The 2004 General Social Survey found that no less than six broad religious categories—Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and “other Eastern religions”—could claim at least 0.5 percent of the population surveyed. Scholars estimate that there are now more than 5 million practicing Muslims in the United States, rivaling the number of Jews (Lippy, 2000). (It is worth noting that estimates for the number of Muslims in the United States vary widely, from 1 million to 7 million.) This trend toward pluralism has been fueled in part by the increase in immigration from Asia, Africa and the Middle East since the 1940s (Lippy, 2000).

The Christian landscape in the United States is also becoming increasingly fragmented. Within Protestantism, the dominant sect for the entire history of the country, traditional mainline denominations such as Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Lutherans have been declining in numbers since at least the mid-20th century, with accompanying growth among other Protestant denominations such as Baptists and Pentecostals (Lippy, 2000). This fragmentation of the American religious landscape, within both Christianity and the broader culture, has caused some conservative religious leaders to warn that there is no longer a shared set of values to guide the nation. These
alarmist warnings notwithstanding, pluralism and fragmentation are growing trends that likely are here to stay.

Religion and the Popular Media

American media have covered religious news since the advent of newspapers, but Willey (2008) argues that for most of that time the topic was covered primarily on a “church page” that contained little more than event listings and copies of local preachers’ sermons. Religion news began to get better play starting in the late 1970s. Willey attributes this to several factors, including the election of President Jimmy Carter, an evangelical Christian; the proliferation of televangelists in the United States; the rise of Christian conservative politics; and the Muslim cleric-led Iranian revolution and hostage crisis. Interest in religion news continued to increase in the 1990s, and membership in the Religion Newswriters Association more than doubled between the 1980s and mid-1990s (Shepard, 1995). The Dallas Morning News won praise in 1994 when it created one of the first stand-alone religion news sections at a major newspaper, and subscriptions to the Religion News Service newswire doubled from about 200 in 1994 to 400 in 1998 (Willey, 2008).

The picture of religion reporting in the 2000s is murkier. Kim (2001) found a surge of reader interest in religious issues after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, but a recent headcount found only about 200 full-time religion writers working in secular American newsrooms, with rarely more than one at any given newspaper (Beckerman, 2004). It is unclear how recent layoffs have affected the number of reporters covering
religion, but there was much fretting about the state of religion coverage when *The Dallas Morning News* stopped publishing its religion section—widely regarded as the best in the nation—in January 2007 because of budget shortfalls (Elliott, 2007).

Religion is one of the most important aspects of many Americans’ lives, but the research shows that audiences think the news media often underachieve with their coverage of the subject. A 2000 survey by the Public Agenda Foundation found that 44 percent of respondents said the media do a worse job covering religion than other subjects (Farkas et. al., 2001). The survey also found that 56 percent of respondents said too many journalists are biased against religion and religious people—an assessment shared by an alarming 46 percent of the journalists surveyed.

Surprisingly, a review of the literature revealed little recent scholarly work attempting to characterize in broad terms the coverage of religion in newspapers and magazines. Much of the scholarship that exists explores niche topics such as the use of religious symbology in media or the prevalence of certain religious themes, such as prayer or apocalypse, rather than broadly characterize the content of religion reporting. Diane Winston (2006), the Knight Chair in Media and Religion at the University of Southern California, noted that there is “a paucity of research on religion and media,” (p. 693), despite the topic’s importance.

Buddenbaum’s 1986 content analysis is the seminal study, cited in a great deal of subsequent literature. She analyzed all religion stories in *The New York Times*, the Minneapolis *Star* and *The Richmond Times-Dispatch* during a three-month period and found that the stories were mostly about Protestants, tended to be about change or conflict in organized churches and did not focus on belief or religious practices, unless
they were the subject of a controversy or conflict. Dart (2001) conducted a content analysis of religion news in 1998 and 1999 in *Time, Newsweek, US News & World Report, USA Today, The New York Times, The Chicago Tribune, Chicago Sun-Times* and six television stations and found that the coverage failed to provide enough context, rarely focused on spirituality and was usually limited to coverage of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. More recently, Vultee, Velker and Craft (2008) compared religion coverage in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and the *Houston Chronicle* in 1992 and 2000 to see if it had changed. They found that coverage as a whole in 2000 was less negative than in 1992, focused less on conflict and embraced a broader understanding as religion that encompasses faith and values rather than particular doctrines. However, they found that most coverage still focuses on Christianity, as one might expect in a majority Christian nation. The study suggests that religion coverage is improving, but a broader follow-up study is sorely needed.

Lacking a robust body of contemporary scholarly work characterizing media coverage of religion, much of what is written about the subject is in journals and trade publications. These commentaries tend to be critical. Writing in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Beckerman (2004) observed: “Our news media seldom puncture the surface in their reporting on religion. … The journalist glances at religious community as if staring through the glass of an ant farm, remarking at what the strange creatures are doing, but missing the motivation behind the action” (p. 27). She notes that in their coverage of the recent controversies about gay religious leaders, for example, journalists often reported the positions of different participants—complete with sensational and inflammatory quotes—but largely failed to examine the reasons for those beliefs. Beckerman also
argues that religion reporters tend to filter their stories through a political lens, generalizing entire denominations or belief sets as either liberal or conservative.

Journalists also have been criticized for sensationalizing their coverage of religion and focusing too much on religious scandals. In the 2000 survey by the Public Agenda Foundation, 64 percent of respondents said coverage of religion is more likely to be about a scandal than coverage of other issues (Farkas et. al., 2001). Fifty-nine percent of the journalists who responded said they agreed. Other scholars have complained that reporters fail to provide sufficient context in their religion reporting, using terms such as “evangelical” or “fundamentalist” without explaining either the doctrinal underpinnings or the broader connotations of such labels (Shepard, 1995).

Finally, Jenkins (2005) writes that the media often fail to cover “normality” within religion, the mundane aspects of faith such as belief, morality and spirituality. This assertion is supported by recent studies by both the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Ford Foundation that found that few news stories “take faith as a starting point” (as cited in Beckerman, 2004, p. 27). Kohut (2001) writes that such polls show that much of the public sees this conspicuous absence as evidence of the media’s antipathy toward the religious values that are central to many Americans’ lives.

A recent example of religion reporting that illustrates both its strengths and weaknesses was coverage of the 2008 presidential contest between Barack Obama and John McCain. A 2008 study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that religion received a great deal of attention in the media coverage of the election and was acknowledged as an important issue. Four percent of stories about the general election campaign focused on religion, more than all
other subjects except the economy, Iraq, the role of the Clintons and the Democratic convention. Yet the study found that the news media did not often attempt to examine the role of faith for the candidates and their policies, instead focusing on a controversy or political problem. Sixty-eight percent of the religion stories surveyed were about a conflict or controversy, including rumors that Barack Obama is a Muslim, Sarah Palin’s evangelical Christianity and the candidates’ connections to the Rev. Jeremiah Wright and other controversial religious figures. But despite the prevalence of religious controversy in coverage of the election, many news outlets, including The Washington Post and The New York Times, ran high-profile stories about the candidates’ faiths and the impact of faith on their policies.

With so much criticism of religion reporting in scholarly journals and trade publications, it is easy to overlook the examples of excellent work done at newspapers, magazines, Web sites and broadcast outlets of all sizes and across the country. Many of the best examples of religion reporting can be found among the winners of annual awards presented by the Religion Communicators Council, the Religion Newswriters Association and the American Academy of Religion. The awards during the past five years have gone to a huge variety of reporters and news outlets, but several have won the most frequent acclaim. Among medium-market, large-market and national print publications, The Boston Globe, Sacramento Bee, Dallas Morning News, Salt Lake Tribune, Christian Science Monitor, Chicago Tribune, National Journal and Newsweek have distinguished themselves with the most religion reporting awards. In smaller markets, The Birmingham (Ala.) News, The Grand Rapids (Mich.) Press, The Mobile (Ala.) Press-Register, The (Charleston, S.C.) Post and Courier and The Huntsville (Ala.) Times have won the most
print accolades. *The Dallas Morning News, Salt Lake Tribune, Houston Chronicle* and *Deseret Morning News* have been recognized multiple times for having the best newspaper religion sections. And CBS, National Public Radio and American Public Media have been the most highly decorated among broadcast media.

The lists of prize-winning stories during the past few years show that religion reporters are covering a wide variety of subjects. Winners include such far-flung fare as David O’Reilly’s 2007 series on the state of Catholicism for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*; Lisa Miller’s controversial *Newsweek* cover story in 2008 about a religious justification for gay marriage; CBS News’ 2006 series about Muslims in America; Manya Brachear’s reporting in 2007 for the *Chicago Tribune* about controversial teachings at Barack Obama’s church; and Diane Rehm’s 2006 National Public Radio series about the Koran.

A number of reporters at national publications have distinguished themselves for religion reporting. Perhaps the most well known and influential religion journalist for the past 40 years has been Kenneth L. Woodward, formerly religion editor and now editor at large for *Newsweek* magazine. Woodward is notable for his penchant for probing broad issues of faith that affect millions of Americans but rarely make the front page or the 6 o’clock news. His coverage for *Newsweek* has touched on issues such as the changing idea of hell in Christian theology, the role of feminism in the modern church and violence in the Bible and the Qur’an—issues that are not only thought-provoking, but essential to understanding ourselves and our times. Another notable national voice reporting on religion is Peter Steinfels, who writes for *The New York Times*’ On Religion column that comments on religious news and trends in society. His work has touched on issues as diverse as religious implications of stem cell research, the intersection of politics and
religion and developments in the Catholic church. Lisa Miller, who replaced Woodward as *Newsweek*’s main religion writer, also has become prominent recently, in large part because of the controversy she stirred with her 2008 article about gay marriage.

The picture of religion reporting in the 21st century is mixed, with a wide variety of excellent coverage available at news outlets large and small but significant shortcomings of much coverage acknowledged by both audiences and journalists.

**Challenges of Covering Religion**

A number of possible explanations are put forward in journals, trade publications and the news media for the difficulties reporters have covering religion. Foremost among these is the supposedly secular nature of newsrooms. As Beckerman (2004) writes: “The conventional wisdom about why religion gets shortchanged is that journalists, being predominantly secular, cannot appreciate or understand the world as religious people see it” (p. 28).

But there is considerable disagreement over exactly how secular American newsrooms are. Controversy about the issue exploded in 1980, when the oft-cited Lichter-Rothman study caused a firestorm among conservative and religious commentators by reporting that 87 percent of the “media elite” rarely or never attended religious services and 50 percent did not affiliate themselves with a religion (Lichter & Rothman, 1981). But more recent studies have refuted these conclusions. A 1996 study by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (1997) found that almost 80 percent of journalists reported some religious affiliation, and another survey, conducted in 1993,
found that 72 percent of the journalists surveyed said religion was important or very important in their lives (as cited in Underwood, 2001).

Nevertheless, the view that journalists are out of sync with most Americans’ religious beliefs persists, particularly among religious leaders and conservative commentators. Former philosophy professor Robert Case II is so concerned about this trend that in 1999 he founded the World Journalism Institute to train evangelical Christian journalists for positions in the secular media. Case sees the problem as one of mutual distrust and misunderstanding between evangelical Christians and journalists:

“There is a chasm between people that work at The Washington Post and The New York Times and people like us. We think that if someone from The New York Times lived next door to us they might eat our children. And they would think the same thing about us” (Beckerman, 2004, p. 28).

Another explanation for the shortcomings of religion reporting is that many journalists simply lack the knowledge or training required to adequately cover such a complex and sensitive topic. Shepard (1995) points out that until the 1970s, most reporters covering religion were ordained clergy with formal religious training, a practice that yielded more knowledgeable religion writing. When this practice fell out of favor because of potential conflicts of interest among these clergy-cum-reporters, new religion reporters were often drawn from other beats and consequently did not have the level of knowledge of their predecessors. Smith (2004) argues that this lack of knowledge causes many reporters to squeeze religion stories into one of several simplistic categories of “church stories,” such as wacko fundamentalists, scandal, institutional homophobia or political ambition. Some university journalism programs, including the University of
Missouri and Columbia University, are trying to produce more knowledgeable religion reporters by offering specialized programs or courses. Missouri’s Center on Religion & the Professions sponsors programs to improve religious literacy among journalists, and Columbia offers a dual-degree graduate program in journalism and religion.

Perhaps the most compelling explanation for reporters’ difficulty covering religion is that the principles and news values of modern journalism are difficult to apply to “soft” topics like faith. Beckerman (2004) argues that journalism is based on a “rational, empirical system of proof” (p. 29) and supposed objectivity that is unable to approach a subjective topic like faith on its own terms. The reporter and the person of faith are, in effect, speaking different languages, with the reporter looking for concrete, verifiable truths and the person of faith speaking about things that are by nature unverifiable. Vulkee, Velter and Craft (2008) argue that reporters find it difficult to fit religion into a set of journalistic news values that prizes conflict above all else. They write: “Journalists [have], perhaps unsurprisingly, fallen back on what they knew how to do well: covering religion as they would cover politics or sports, complete with all the conflict and negativity” (p. 3). Beckerman (2004) maintains that the problem is compounded by the fact that journalists are trained to assess potential stories in terms of timeliness or traditional news pegs, which many religion stories lack. Stories about faith or belief may not be linked to an event that a daily newspaper journalist would see as newsworthy.
Database searches reveal that far more attention has been paid to coverage of Islam than to other non-Western religions, such as Hinduism or Buddhism. There is no shortage of commentaries and essays that criticize reporters for relying too heavily on negative cultural stereotypes to characterize a Muslim world that is in fact extremely diverse, and for portraying the Islamic world as the exotic “other” (Christensen, 2006). Rendall and Macdonald (2008) argue that the American media perpetuate the idea that predominantly Muslim cultures are fundamentally different than—and by implication, inferior to—American culture. But many of these and similar observations rely on particularly inflammatory comments made on radio and television rather than a scholarly examination of a broad range of coverage. Two studies come closest to addressing the issue dispassionately. Pollock, Piccillo, Leopardi, Gratale and Cabot (2005) examined coverage of Islam in 19 major U.S. newspapers during the year after the Sept. 11 attacks and found that 14 of the 19 were largely favorable or neutral in their coverage. Hungerford (2006), however, found that in English-language newspapers in both Britain and the United States, stories covering Islam were framed in terms of conflict about 80 percent of the time, compared to 40 percent of the time for stories on Christianity.

For marginal and non-mainstream religions, one of the most ambitious studies of media coverage was an examination by religion scholar Sean McCloud (2004), who defined marginal religions in America as those outside the well established Judeo-Christian tradition or popular non-Western traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. McCloud analyzed nearly 40 years of coverage of non-mainstream religions in
news magazines, general interest magazines and special interest magazines. He argues that journalists have consistently labeled as “fringe” (p. 4) almost any new religious movement that seem overly exotic, dogmatic and zealous. These have included the Nation of Islam, Asian new religions, “Moonies,” occult spirituality groups and hundreds of others. Such groups have often been depicted using stereotypical cult attributes such as coercion, brainwashing, exploitation and fraud. This, McCloud argues, has allowed journalists to shape what is considered mainstream by employing religions less familiar to most Americans as “negative reference groups” (p. 6) in comparison to which majority groups can define themselves.

Other studies were more limited in scope and focused on the coverage of specific groups or incidents. Chen’s 2003 analysis of newspaper coverage surrounding the 2002 Olympic Games in Salt Lake City found that Mormons, despite their large numbers in the United States, were still treated stereotypically, although many of the stereotypes were positive—hard-working, thrifty, clean-cut, honest. The Society of Professional Journalists was so dismayed by the media’s coverage of the 1993 deaths of 86 people at the Branch Davidians’ compound in Waco, Texas, that the group conducted a study and issued guidelines for covering unfamiliar religious sects (Black & Steele, 1993). The study concluded that press coverage of marginal groups tends to indulge in stories emphasizing stereotypical “cult” traits such as oddity, deviance and charisma at the expense of nuanced reporting. Religion scholar Paul Boyer (1997), who is frequently contacted by reporters as an expert on fringe religions, complained that journalists who had sought his comments to use in their coverage of the Heaven’s Gate group’s mass suicide in 1997 had trivialized and sensationalized both his comments and the entire story.
The news media also drew criticism—much of it self-administered—for its coverage of the shootings at an Amish school in Nickel Mines, Pa. (Kitch, 2007). Print and television outlets were criticized for their intrusiveness and for framing their coverage through stereotypes in which the Amish “ceased to be a group of distinct people and instead became signs, standing for innocence lost” (p. 19). And most recently, raids in 2008 on a fundamentalist Mormon sect in Texas that practices polygamy caused nationwide—and even worldwide—media hysteria. While database searches revealed no scholarly analysis of the coverage—likely because the event was so recent—many Internet bloggers decried the coverage as overkill (Red Blue America, 2008) and the Mormon church criticized the media for conflating its church with the unaffiliated polygamist sect (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2008).

The literature review shows that large percentages of audiences—as well as many scholars and journalists—believe the media do not do a good job covering religion, even though there is a wide variety of excellent reporting on religion at news outlets across the country. Because of some reporters’ lack of knowledge of religion and the difficulty in making religion conform to contemporary news values, stories about religion are often tied to conflict and controversy and rarely take faith as a starting point. Coverage of Islam, while not necessarily portraying the religion negatively, often resorts to cultural stereotypes and frames stories in the context of conflict. And reporters tend to give superficial treatment to non-mainstream religious groups, fitting them into “cult” stereotypes. This project seeks to avoid these pitfalls and follow in the tradition of the best religion reporting—that done by Newsweek’s Woodward and others—by probing the
spiritual lives of Americans who follow a variety of faiths—Western, non-Western and non-mainstream.

**Issues to Explore**

In exploring issues of faith in America, this study will follow three guidelines developed in response to weaknesses of much religion coverage identified in the literature review: Take faith as a starting point for the articles, avoid stereotypes of faiths and do not attempt to add newsworthiness by seeking out controversy.

The study examines three main issues related to religious faith in America. First, the work explores the role religion plays in the lives of people of faith. Is it seen as an obligation, a source of inner strength and personal development, a social exercise or some combination thereof? Second, the study looks at factors that cause people to embrace religion and how life events challenge or strengthen faith. Finally, the project examines the degree to which members of non-Western and non-mainstream faiths identify themselves in opposition to mainstream American society.

**Method and Limitations**

This project explores the issues through a series of magazine-length profiles of faith. The articles are representative profiles that focus on the role of religion and faith for individual people or families from diverse religious backgrounds. The research was
conducted through interviews and participant observation with the primary subjects, their religious leaders and others with whom they are associated.

In order to capture the role of faith in various aspects of the subjects’ lives, I traveled to the hometowns of the subjects to spend time with them. The locations of the interviews were San Diego, Calif.; Raleigh, N.C.; and Moss Point, Miss. I selected these locations because I was able to find a congregation and interview subjects in each place that were willing to participate and contributed to the goal of presenting diverse religious perspectives. Travel expenses were paid from student loan money and personal funds. I conducted the interviews and observations in a number of settings: at the subjects’ places of worship, in their homes and as they went about their daily lives. I collected most of the data for each profile during a period of a few days to a week in January and February 2006, but I spoke again with the subjects three years later to get updates on their lives and faith.

The primary limitation of this study is that it is unable to draw conclusions about American religion and faith in general. The scope of the project is far too limited for an undertaking of that magnitude. Instead, the project seeks to explore American faith through a series of vignettes that, while standing alone, illuminate commonalities of American religious experiences. These commonalities are addressed in the conclusion.

The sensitive nature of the topic was also a limitation of the study. People are widely divergent in their willingness to discuss a topic as personal as religion, so the success of the study was to some degree dictated by the personalities of the subjects and my skill in earning their trust and eliciting personal views, memories and reflections. In order to increase my likelihood of success, I worked with congregation and community
leaders to identify promising subjects and secure their cooperation. While my profile subjects were remarkably open in discussing their experiences and views on faith—and were in many cases eager to discuss them—it is impossible to know how honest and forthcoming they were.

Another limitation was the subjects’ ability to articulate the reasons they practice their faiths and the role religion plays in their lives. It was evident during the interviews that some of the subjects hadn’t thought much about these issues, and they struggled to put their beliefs and feelings about religion into words. On the other hand, some of the subjects seemed too practiced in explaining their beliefs to outsiders, and it was difficult to get beyond talking points of a particular religion and explore deeper, more personal issues of faith. This was more of a factor in the profiles focusing on the non-Western and non-mainstream religions.

Despite the limitations, the project succeeds in presenting insightful profiles of diverse religious beliefs and what those religions mean to their followers.

Chapter Breakdown

The bulk of the study consists of three profile chapters. The first chapter is a profile of an Egyptian-American family that attends the Islamic Center of Raleigh in Raleigh, N.C. The second is a story about First Christian Church, a predominantly African-American congregation in Moss Point, Miss., as its members recover from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. The third article profiles of a member and former monk at the San Diego Hare Krishna Temple in San Diego, Calif. Finally, the concluding
chapter draws parallels between the religions and people profiled. In addition, there is an appendix listing all interviews conducted for the project.
Chapter 1

In the Melting Pot, America’s Young Muslims Find Perils

It could be any other home in Cary, a leafy, affluent suburb of Raleigh, N.C., were it not for the guttural sounds of the Arabic language drifting out of the AbdelBaky family’s living room.

Five members of the family—Samy, 59; his wife, Kariman Allam, 55; their sons Hesham, 28, and Omar, 18; and Hesham’s wife, Aya Zaghloul, 28—sit on beige overstuffed sofas and follow along in their copies of the Qur’an, the Muslim holy book, as Kariman reads aloud. The recitation is lilting and lyrical, the tone of her voice rising to the end of one verse and falling to the end of the next. The effect to an outsider is hypnotic, as the exotic and unfamiliar musicality lull one into a trance.

The Egyptian-American AbdelBaky family is gathered for its weekly halaqa—Arabic for circle of knowledge—during which the members meet each Saturday to read the Qur’an, discuss Islamic teachings and enjoy each other’s company. Samy, the patriarch, started the tradition five years ago as the family’s four children grew up and time together became harder to find. The halaqa is at once a time to practice their faith, to discuss the news and to catch up on what’s going on in the lives of each of them.

The gathering is a casual family affair, with little ceremony. The family members converge from their various homes and Saturday morning activities to eat a late breakfast,
on this day consisting of pastries from that American suburban staple, Panera Bread.
After breakfast, they settle on the sofas to take turns reading scripture in Arabic for 15
minutes or so, followed by a short lesson or discussion led by any member of the family.
They trade off week-to-week, each selecting for his or her turn a religious topic or issue
in the news that affects Muslims.

The gathering is representative of the kind of contrasts one increasingly finds in
American homes as the country becomes ever more diverse. The residence itself is a
typical suburban home, white clapboard with a neatly trimmed yard and multiple late-
model cars—a Toyota Corolla, a Honda Odyssey and a Nissan Altima—in the driveway.
Inside, the trappings of a modern American home commingle with traditional Egyptian
fare: a small table topped with Middle Eastern lamps and vases, a decorative camel train
winding across the floor, and framed Islamic art such as an Arabic scroll and a depiction
of the 99 names given to Allah in the Qur’an. As in so many American homes, the
television and entertainment center are the focal point of the living room. But the screen
shows an Egyptian soccer match with scoreboard graphics written in Arabic.

The family members offer similar contrasts. Aya, a pretty, dark-haired young
woman with almond-shaped eyes and a broad smile, is a study in J. Crew chic, wearing
comfortable blue jeans and a black ribbed turtleneck sweater. Her husband, Hesham, has
closely cropped hair and wears a fashionable black leather jacket. “As American as apple
pie,” says Hesham, who was born in Boston. Samy and Kariman’s appearance conveys
something of their Egyptian roots. Samy, a chemical engineer at BASF, dons the short,
neat beard common among Arab professionals, and Kariman, a high school science
teacher, wears a modest floor-length gray skirt and matching hijab, the headscarf worn by many Muslim women.

Side-by-side, the two couples are a visualization of the old world colliding with the new in the space between two generations, one born in Egypt and the other in America.

But despite their apparent differences in the way they dress and the accent in their English, the family is bound closely together by blood and their shared belief in the importance of family. It is the pillar of the Muslim faith and community, the institution on which all others are built. “In Islam, everything is building blocks,” Hesham says. “The most important thing is your immediate family; then is community. In order for the community to be successful, your family has to be successful. It puts a very strong emphasis on the family as a unit.”

And that is what the AbdelBakys celebrate in their weekly halaqa—their bond as a Muslim family, and the shared beliefs, values, sorrows, joys, accomplishments and setbacks that entails. For an hour each Saturday, they are not Samy the chemical engineer or Hesham the dentist or Aya the software developer. They are the AbdelBaky family, an island of solidarity in this roiling, churning melting pot of America.

Is Melting Pot a Dirty Word?

The idea of the cultural melting pot, in which diverse elements come together to form a new and harmonious whole, is one of the oldest and most revered tenets of the American social and cultural ethos. The concept, if not the exact term, traces its roots to
Jean de Crèvecoeur’s seminal work *Letters from an American Farmer*, published in 1782. It has been a theme of a wide range of literary works by or about Americans, including those by esteemed authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry James and Israel Zangwill.

But Imran Aukhil, a spokesman for and lifelong member of the Islamic Association of Raleigh, to which the AbdelBaky’s belong, takes exception to the term and its implication that Muslims in America must become like everyone else. “Once upon a time the United States was a mosaic of different cultures and value systems, and now it’s evolving more into a melting pot,” said Aukhil, who is 25 and was born in Durham, N.C., to Indian and Pakistani parents. “So rather than having individual groups that form this fabric of the country, now you have really a big melting pot and all these mosaic groups … slowly flow into the melting pot and become one.”

It’s the American ideal, but it is no easy feat. It was difficult enough for Italian and Irish immigrants to New York or Chicago in the 19th century, who shared a Christian background with the majority culture but stood apart because of their Catholicism, to melt into and become largely indistinguishable from those who came before them. It is even more difficult, Aukhil said, for the children of Muslim immigrants who have values and beliefs that diverge from the majority of the people with whom they work, study and socialize. “The fact of the matter is that Islam does have a very clear system of values and family structure,” he said. “It is tough for young people who are born and raised in this country who are surrounded by this melting pot effect. … You can’t just have a Muslim child and throw them out in the culture and assume that they’ll turn out to be ideal Muslims. They’re bombarded by un-Islamic ideals and values.”
The cultural differences Muslims face in the United States are legion. Consumption of alcohol and drugs is prohibited in Islam, whereas drinking alcohol is widely accepted in American society. Traditional Muslim culture values money only insofar as it allows you to take care of your family and support the mosque, but America is widely known as the most consumption-oriented culture in the world. And Muslims are forbidden to date before marriage, a restriction that is likely inconceivable to most Americans.

Aukhil said first-generation Muslim immigrants to the United States are able to insulate themselves somewhat from un-Islamic values by congregating in tightly knit communities, as Italian and Irish immigrants did before them and other immigrants still do today. An example is Dearborn, Mich., the Detroit suburb where one-third of the city’s 100,000 residents are of Arab ancestry, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Their clout in Dearborn is such that the local Wal-Mart carries more than 500 specialty items geared toward Arab-Americans, the Associated Press reported. (The Raleigh area is estimated to have around the same number of Muslims as Dearborn, but spread out in a much larger city.)

The melting pot is a greater challenge for young Muslim Americans. They are full participants in mainstream American society—playing the same sports and video games, going to the same schools, watching the same movies, wearing the same clothes and listening to the same music as their peers—but their parents want to ensure they are grounded in the essential values and traditions of Islam. “Raising children in the West was extremely difficult,” said Samy AbdelBaky, who came to the United States from Cairo for graduate school in 1977. “We have some ethics in Islam that are very important
for us in the religious point of view. …A lot of people when they come, they found it is free society, they can do anything they want, and they lost their religion completely.”

The AbdelBakys kept their children, all of whom were born in America, grounded in their Muslim faith by being active in their mosque, the Islamic Association of Raleigh. Founded in 1984, the mosque has between 400 and 500 paid members but draws crowds of a few thousand for Friday prayers—the equivalent of Christians going to church on Sunday—and as many as 7,000 for major Islamic holidays. The mosque follows orthodox, mainstream Islam that focuses on the text of the Koran and does not subscribe to any particular school of interpretation, Aukhil said.

The AbdelBaky children attended the mosque’s Al-Iman School for elementary and middle school, and they were active in youth activities. When the children entered public school at Cary High School, they were grounded enough in their faith to find friends and make decisions their parents mostly approved of. They tended to stay away from the crowds that drank and did drugs, hanging out instead with better-behaved and more studious types. “My friends are all fairly religious Christians,” Omar said. “The morals are almost exactly the same. … All my friends are from my … classes and stuff, so we all work hard in school.”

Kariman said she never tried to isolate her kids from mainstream American society, and in fact encouraged them to build friendships with people from diverse backgrounds. “We never tell them this is corrupt society, don’t go out,” she said. “We tell them there are people in the society, regardless of the religion, they will be good and there are people will be bad or not have the same value as us. We don’t even say bad or good because we cannot judge the values of other people.”
Even so, Kariman said there were times when her children lost friends because the differences in values became too great. Hesham grew up as friends with two neighboring children that were non-Muslims, she said, but he stopped spending time with them as they progressed through high school. “I tried to know the parents and make a relationship with them, and all of the sudden he stopped seeing them and going out with them,” Kariman said. “I said, ‘Why you stop seeing them?’ He said, ‘We don’t have anything in common with them any more.’ The kids can make their own judgment at a certain age.”

**Dating, and Other Forbidden Fruits**

Hesham and Aya have been married for more than five years now, which is shorter than the period of time they’ve been going out on dates. In Islam, dating before marriage isn’t allowed. Instead, potential mates engage in a frustrating game of subtle flirtation and expressions of interest followed by formal marriage talks between their families. It is the bane of young Muslims in the United States, and likely around the world. “You have crushes,” Hesham said. “It was frustrating. That’s probably the hardest thing of growing up in Muslim society is that aspect of it. You don’t have a desire to drink, you don’t have a desire to use drugs, but you do have a desire to procreate.”

The young couple went to middle school and high school together but only knew each other by reputation. They became part of the same circle of friends while studying computer science at N.C. State University, and they eventually became interested in pursuing a relationship. “It was obvious that our feelings for each other started to grow, but we couldn’t go out,” said Aya, whose parents also are from Egypt. “We couldn’t go
to the movies, we couldn’t go out on a date, we couldn’t go out to dinner alone. … Even in groups as a social thing, my parents and his parents weren’t very comfortable with it.”

Going to the movies, in particular, was forbidden, with the dark theaters and potential for romantic mischief. “The movies always has this bad rep, like ‘Oh, they go to the movies and make out in the back,’” Aya said. “So even the movies was kind of iffy.”

Aya said the restrictions on dating led many of her Muslim friends to get engaged and married younger than they might have otherwise, because engagement is seen as sufficient commitment to allow a couple to see each other socially. “We [still] had to go out in a group,” she said. “That’s when group outings were accepted. And so that’s kind of how I got to know him.”

It’s an unusual way of doing things in America, where young people often have multiple long-term relationships before settling on a life partner. Aya said her co-workers at IBM were incredulous when she announced her engagement to a man she didn’t know very well. “All of my coworkers were like, ‘How can you get married? You haven’t even lived with the guy yet? You have to live with the person to really get to know him.’ But that’s just not our standard. That’s not how we do it.”

Aukhil, too, found his partner the traditional Muslim way. The mosque spokesman and his eventual wife, Mariya, met at a wedding and began to communicate, albeit supervised closely by their parents. Eventually the families approved of the union and gave permission for them to be married. “It was a very traditional process with a slight modern twist in that we were able to talk quite a bit before the engagement and marriage,” he said.
The dating issue is toughest on teenagers, with their raging hormones, heightened sense of drama and contempt for authority. Hesham sometimes fought with his parents when they wouldn’t let him attend a coed party with school friends. For Omar, the rule has meant he has to explain to his friends why he can’t participate in what, to many, is just a normal part of being a teenager.

“A lot of people are like, ‘Why don’t you ask her out,’ or ‘I think she likes you’ or something,” he said. “That was at the beginning. I already had that conversation with all of them. … It was weird at the beginning, but now all my friends know, so it’s normal now. It is tough that if a girl likes you or you like a girl that you can’t do anything about it.”

But a growing number of Muslim youths at the Raleigh mosque and around the country are finding ways around the rule, Aukhil said. Some use the Internet to flirt and meet members of the opposite sex, while others date surreptitiously behind their parents’ backs. “The melting pot effect is happening, and young people are getting completely caught up in these things, and they are dating,” he said. But “even among the people who do date, it’s still not going to be as open as typically is done in American society. It’ll be secretive in some case because it is not accepted by their parents’ generation.” The Muslim community has so far avoided significant problems with teen pregnancy, Aukhil said.

Aya said she and Hesham likely would have dated before getting engaged if their parents had permitted it but that was never a possibility. And despite what he acknowledges was one of the more difficult aspect of his own upbringing, Hesham plans to raise his children—Amir, 2, and Zain, 6 months—the same way. “If you’re a guy and
you’re alone in your place with a girl, you’re going to want to do something [sexual].”
Hesham said. “Islam protects you from doing that in the first place. They say don’t be alone with a girl or a guy in the room with a closed door. … I might even be more strict just because I know what goes on in schools.”

Other perils abound for young Muslims in the United States that were much rarer in their parents’ countries. Drugs, alcohol and illicit sex do exist in predominantly Muslim cultures—as a simple Google search for “Cairo prostitution” makes abundantly clear—but they are ghettoized to the shadier quarters of cities and are largely invisible to those who don’t seek them out. Not so in America. “The things kids exposed to now, it is completely different than the things we exposed [to] when we were young,” said Kariman, who grew up in the small city of Kafr el-Sheikh, about 80 miles north of Cairo. “The first time I saw a TV, it was when I was in the middle school. We were going only to school and coming back home. … We didn’t have the peer pressure they have.”

The AbdelBaky children say they have never drunk alcohol or gotten involved in the party scene, but it’s not for lack of opportunity. Omar said about half the kids he goes to school with smoke pot and drink alcohol regularly. “It’s pretty much everywhere,” he said. And the AbdelBakys’ abstinence may be an extraordinary case, Aukhil said—extraordinary in both the parents’ dedication to raising their children as good Muslims and in the entire family’s devotion to the tenets of their faith. Aukhil estimates that 40 percent or so of the Muslims he knows drink alcohol socially, with a smaller number becoming involved with drugs.

“I’ve seen over the years how much it’s evolved, and I can say since then how much, unfortunately, drugs and alcohol have permeated into our community,” he said.
“It’s not something that affects the majority, but it’s close. With young people, if they
don’t do those things themselves they’re surrounded by it in their social circles. You
cannot put yourself in an environment where people are drinking and doing drugs and
smoking and expect yourself to never get involved in those things.”

Blending In and Standing Out

The AbdelBakys consider themselves thoroughly American. Samy and Kariman
are both naturalized citizens who vote in elections, went to their kids’ soccer games,
mingle with the neighbors and plan to remain here the rest of their lives. The younger
AbdelBakys wouldn’t even stand out in a crowd, especially in a 21st-century America
where a quarter of the population, and growing, is non-white, according to the U.S.
Census Bureau. They dress fashionably, shop at the mall, hold professional jobs and
sprinkle their unaccented American English with the word “like,” to the consternation of
English teachers everywhere.

It is more than simple appearance or speech patterns. The native-born
AbdelBakys have that ineffable Americanness about them—the cocksure attitude,
inqusitiveness and confidence for which Americans are know around the world. “I love
my American identity,” said Hesham, who has been to Egypt about a dozen times. “I’m
more American than I am Egyptian. The way you talk, the way you communicate, the
way you handle yourself, the way you think. When you go to Egypt, people think on a
different level than an American would.”
But that is not to say they never stand out. Prayer is a particularly conspicuous example. Muslims must pray five times a day, and they require space in which to do it. Unlike Christians, who can simply close their eyes and pray unnoticed, Muslims kneel on the floor and prostrate themselves. American schedules don’t accommodate the need to pray multiple times a day on a strict schedule, and school and office buildings usually have no place in which to do it.

The AbdelBakys, like many Muslims, have come up with innovative solutions. Samy prays in his private office at work, and he is able to close his door for a few minutes and place a do not disturb sign on the doorknob. He goes to the mosque to pray most days before and after work, and takes a long lunch break for Friday prayers, which Islam requires be performed as part of a congregation. In dental school at UNC Hospitals, Hesham often prayed in the janitor’s closet because it was the only space available. When Omar was in high school, he and 10 or 15 other Muslim students would borrow an empty classroom to conduct their Friday prayers together during lunch. “It was [weird] at the beginning, when people asked me, ‘Where are you going’ or ‘Why didn’t you come to lunch on Friday?’” he said.

The AbdelBakys say they never felt more conspicuous than in the months after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, when across the country hate crimes were perpetrated against Muslims and even against Sikhs who were mistaken for Muslims. The AbdelBakys don’t dress like Bedouins or the Taliban, but they do wear the olive skin and dark features Americans typically associate with Arabs.

Hesham was president of N.C. State’s Muslim Student Association when the attacks occurred, and for him—like for most Americans—life changed in an instant. “We
knew at that point in time campus life was completely changed for all Muslims on
campus,” he said. “We pretty much knew something bad was going to happen to the
Muslims on campus. [There were] a lot of hate crimes.” Some Muslim women on
campus—who tend to stand out because of the headscarves many wear—got spat at and
otherwise harassed, Hesham said, so the community started a buddy system in which
women were always accompanied by a man when they went in public.

Things were better at Cary High School, Kariman said. *The News & Observer* ran
a story about students of different faiths supporting each other after the attacks, and
school officials and teachers emphasized that the attackers did not represent the beliefs of
most Muslims. “The principal [was] very supportive, and all the kids coming around each
other very quickly,” Kariman said.

But things have never quite returned to the way they were before the attacks.
Many Muslims still feel that people are watching them and are uncomfortable when they
see a Muslim or someone with Middle Eastern features in the store or airport, according
to a 2007 study of Muslims in America by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.
The survey found that 53 percent of respondents said it has become more difficult to be a
Muslim in the United States since the attacks, and a quarter of the respondents reported
that in the past year they felt people have acted like they were suspicious of them.
Hesham said his experience bears that out. “I still don’t think it’s blown over yet,” he
said. “Anything you do now you’re scared someone’s watching. If you’re doing
everything perfectly legit, you’re still scared that you’re going to get busted one day. You
never know.” He said he has never been harassed or had problems at the airport, but he
frequently feels people’s eyes on him.
The issue is more difficult for Muslim women, many of whom wear a hijab, the headscarf that is a symbol of modesty and dedication to the prophet Muhammad. The Pew study found that 51 percent of American Muslim women said they wear the hijab at least some of the time. For women who wear the hijab, it is like flying a flag that announces you’re different. “You can’t tell [who’s Muslim] with most guys,” Hesham said. “We could be Hispanic. But with girls that wear the scarf, you can’t miss them. They’re either a nun or they’re Muslim, and most of the time they’re going to be Muslim.” The Pew survey found that men were slightly more worried than women that women might be mistreated if they wear the hijab, and women who wear the hijab were 14 percentage points less likely to worry about mistreatment than those that don’t wear it.

Kariman and Aya said wearing the hijab is usually a choice for American Muslim women, and that many Americans incorrectly believe women who wear the hijab are oppressed or uneducated or overly submissive to men. Kariman—who, like her husband, has a Ph.D. from Northeastern University—didn’t begin wearing the hijab until she was 25. Her father was a trader in a largely agricultural region of northern Egypt, and her family was upper-middle class. Kariman’s family is extraordinarily well educated, and among her five siblings in Egypt—four of them women—are three doctors, an engineer and a journalist. For her and her sisters, wearing the hijab was a personal choice. “My family, the way I was raised, my family never stressed this is an important part of the religion,” she said.

Samy and Kariman married in 1977, and Samy moved to Boston the next month to begin his doctoral studies. Kariman waited a year before joining him, and it was during that year she decided to put on the scarf. “I wanted to just be as modest as the prophet
said,” she said. “I learned more, and the more you learn the more you want to come [closer] to the prophet. … And I said if I’m not going to do it in Egypt before I come [to the United States], it will be very hard to do it here, so I decided to there so when I come here it wouldn’t be hard for me.” She does not regret the decision, and she said wearing the hijab makes people focus on her words and her intellect rather than her hairstyle or appearance. To Kariman, it is liberation from and rejection of the exacting standards of physical appearance and sexuality Western society places on women.

Aya does not wear the hijab. But she said she agrees with Kariman’s thoughts on the subject and will likely decide to wear it at some point. “I’ve thought about it always,” Aya said. “It’s always in the back of my head. I’m just not right now ready for it or comfortable wearing it. But it is in the back of my head, and I do plan on wearing it sometime, once I feel ready.”

**America, the Good and Bad**

For all America’s faults and potential pitfalls for Muslims, Samy AbdelBaky said he believes the good far outweighs the bad. “I think America is a great country,” he said. “It has a lot of good things, otherwise we wouldn’t be here. So as a package, the U.S. for me and my family was better than back in Egypt. This is the reason we continue.” This view is shared by a majority of Muslim Americans, if the Pew survey is any indication. Sixty-three percent of the American Muslims who participated in the survey said they do not think there is a natural conflict between being a devout Muslim and living in modern
society, and 71 percent said they believe most people can succeed in America if they work hard.

The reasons for Samy’s positive assessment of life in America are many of the same ones immigrants to America often cite—the relative tolerance and freedom to do as you please, the educational opportunities for their children and the boundless career and economic potential. Hesham is in the process of opening a dental practice, affirmation that those ideals are alive and well.

But there are other advantages for Muslims living in America that Samy likely did not foresee when he came here more than 30 years ago. For one, being a religious minority has allowed many Muslim immigrants to appreciate their religion more fully and become more dedicated to it as they try to maintain their Muslim identity in a diverse culture. “Because people feel they are minority … they may get closer to each other and start to understand their religion better than they have before,” Samy said. “And especially nowadays with all the talking and stereotypes attacking on Islam and on the prophet, peace be upon him, people will start to go back to their religion, go to the source so they can answer questions. So it act in their benefit that when they read more, they learn more, [and] they get more closer to god. … It is really amazing.” Samy said he has become more religious as a result.

The Islamic Association of Raleigh is an unusually diverse mosque. Many mosques in the United States are dominated by one ethnic group or nationality, Aukhil said, but the Raleigh mosque has no ethnic majority. Forty to 45 percent of the congregation is of Arab extraction; 35 to 40 percent are South Asians, such as Indians, Pakistanis, Afghans and Bangladeshis; and the remainder are East Asians, Eastern
Europeans, Africans, white and black native-born Americans and others. Aukhil said the
diversity fosters a purer approach to Islam. “What ends up happening is you have an
Indian family, an Egyptian family, a Pakistani family, a Saudi family—all of them
practice Islam, but they all have some cultural twist to it,” he said. “But when they’re
practicing Islam together … all of those cultural innovations … get filtered out.
Everything that they share in common, the core of the religion that comes straight from
the text, really starts to shine. … Having this mixture has been nothing short of a blessing
in my generation’s case.”

Kariman is clearly proud of her children’s American identity, even if she remains
concerned about the corrupting influences of America’s materialism, sexuality and
acceptance of alcohol. But she speaks mostly of the younger generation’s tolerance,
open-mindedness and broad worldview. Hesham has internalized that worldview as
thoroughly as he has absorbed the North Carolinian’s love of basketball and the suburban
kid’s passion for soccer. “Just because everyone [in Muslim countries] is Muslim and
thinks the same way, [they] don’t question anything,” he said. “Here you live in a
multidimensional U.S.A., where you have every religion and every culture in the world
here gathered together. … We have a lot more Islam as a religion and not Islam as a
culture. Like, [many older people] would really frown down on an Egyptian marrying an
African-American or an Egyptian marrying a Pakistani or a Pakistani marrying a white
guy. … In our generation, we could care less.”

Samy and Kariman have now spent more than half their lives in the United States,
and they, too, have absorbed many of the values of America’s relatively cosmopolitan
society. They are less likely to be shocked by different ways of thinking and doing things
and are more appreciative of diversity than when they first came to the United States. They also feel less at ease in Egypt’s homogeneous society when they visit family there every other year or so. “I think [my] core belief is [the same], but it make me more analytical because I didn’t see only one side of the world,” Kariman said. “I exposed to everything, so it can actually make better judgment and more open-minded. So when I go to Egypt now, sitting with my sisters, I feel like a stranger because the way they thinking is completely different than the way I’m thinking. Like how to discuss issues, how to be very objective about stuff, this is how I learn it here. Over there … the way they thinking is different.”

It is difficult for young Muslims in America to navigate such a diverse society while staying true to their Islamic beliefs. They embrace and celebrate their American identities but must reject some aspects—such as dating and after-work happy hours—of mainstream American culture. “I think it’s spectacular, this worldview that Americans have,” Aukhil said. “This enthusiasm that an American person will have to go and explore the rest of the world largely comes from the fact that we have been exposed to a little bit of everything and we really want to learn more. … The flip side to that is the melting pot effect. The great thing about [Muslim] countries overseas is that, say what you will about monochromatic, dull lifestyles, [but] the children of parents are still practicing Islam. The drug problem is there, but it’s not nearly as significant as it would be in this country. They’ve been able to maintain family values.”

Much of the burden of helping young people strike a balance falls to the parents. Samy and Kariman were stricter with their children than their parents were with them because they now live in a culture where the majority of people do not share some of the
values that are important to them. Aukhil said the AbdelBakys are known throughout the community as parents who have been particularly dedicated to helping their children thrive in this environment. That involves paying for private school at the mosque, spending time teaching their children about Islam, driving back and forth to the mosque for youth activities and making financial sacrifices so the family can afford trips to Egypt. Without that parental dedication, Aukhil said, young Muslims often lose their way.

“If you’re willing to make those kinds of sacrifices as parents, then the benefits [of America] really pay off,” he said. “Your kids get this worldview, this ambition, this desire to see things and learn and be successful, but they also are able to be religious and follow their values and cultural traditions.”
Chapter 2

Rebuilding Through Faith

Mike Lee has an unusual approach toward retirement. More than 10 years after completing a 32-year career with Bell South, Lee, 67, spends little time relaxing or fishing and is away from his northern Mississippi home more often than not. He said he works harder now than when he was drawing a paycheck.

On an early spring day in March 2009, Lee helped repair the home of an 89-year-old retired teacher in the seaside town of Gulfport, Miss. The woman’s roof was damaged on Aug. 29, 2005, by the 120 mph winds of Hurricane Katrina, but she was too frail and too poor to fix it herself. She had to wait for Lee and his team of volunteers to come around.

Lee has been fixing roofs, gutting houses and hanging drywall in homes on the Mississippi Gulf Coast for most of the past three years. As a member of Graceland Christian Church in Southaven, Miss., Lee responded to a call for volunteers to help with Katrina recovery in late 2005 and has been working through the Disciples of Christ, a mainline Protestant denomination with more than 700,000 members, ever since. Besides working on hurricane recovery projects in Mississippi and Louisiana, he traveled to Iowa to work on flood relief, to Kansas to help after a tornado and to Texas to volunteer after Hurricane Ike in 2008.
“That’s what Jesus called us to do,” Lee said in a slow drawl. “We’re supposed to feed the hungry and house the homeless. I’ve got everything I need, and these people are hurting. I just can’t sit and enjoy my stuff when these people don’t have anything.”

Lee was accompanied that recent day in Gulfport by Karen Jones, Marie and Willie McClendon and the Rev. Lester Brooks, all from First Christian Church, a predominantly black Disciples of Christ congregation in Moss Point, Miss., a town of less than 15,000 residents about 35 miles east. Jones, Brooks and the McClendons had been the recipients of such aid themselves when their homes were flooded by Katrina. The church in Moss Point was where Lee began his more than three-year volunteer stint, and the First Christian Church members were along to pay the favor forward.

Moss Point is one of the poorest communities on the Gulf Coast, with a median family income of $37,712 per year, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In the more affluent towns to the west, median family incomes range from $40,685 in Biloxi to $56,200 in Ocean Springs. With limited financial resources and federal and state responses that most considered inadequate, churches in Moss Point and volunteers from churches across the country stepped in to help residents recover. “If it wasn’t for the churches, wouldn’t nothing be rebuilt,” Lee said. “They didn’t have insurance. Without the church, they’re not going to get any help.”

Brooks, the 57-year-old pastor of First Christian, said God, faith and church have played a crucial role in the community’s ongoing recovery from Hurricane Katrina. “We rebuild here by faith, and I just believe we gonna have to go on by faith,” he said. “If it’s gonna be done, it’s gonna be done by faith.”
Sister Cities

Moss Point and the neighboring town of Pascagoula are at land’s end, where the bayous, swamps and marshes of coastal Mississippi finally melt into the sea. Viewed from above, the towns’ tenuous foothold becomes evident as finger-like tendrils of water eat into the 5-mile-wide tongue of land on which the towns are perched.

The land mass, while not an island, is surrounded on all sides by water. To the west lies the Pascagoula River, a marshy, meandering waterway that broadens into a narrow bay before emptying into the Gulf of Mexico. To the north, separating Moss Point and Pascagoula from higher and drier regions, is the Escatawpa River, a smaller tributary lined with tidal salt marshes and commercial and recreational docks. Eastward is a vast wetland dotted with spindly pine trees, denuded skeletons of hardwoods and the occasional metal scrapyard or backwoods outfit offering air boat tours of the swamp. And to the south is the Mississippi Sound, an open-water estuary separated from the Gulf of Mexico by a strand of narrow barrier islands barely visible in the distance.

This abundance of water provides the towns’ livelihood. At the mouth of the Pascagoula River is Ingalls Shipyard, a Northrop Grumman-owned U.S. Navy contractor that is the largest private employer in the state. Shipbuilding has replaced fishing as the towns’ economic engine, but roadside stands selling fresh-caught Gulf shrimp are still a mainstay, and recreational fishing charters and services remain a significant part of the coastal economy.

The water is also a constant threat to the towns’ existence. Pascagoula fronts the Mississippi Sound and is an average of only 10 feet above sea level; Moss Point, an
average of 16 feet above sea level, has no oceanfront but is surrounded by the two rivers
and riddled with bayous and sloughs. The towns’ elevations are high enough to keep
most of the land dry most of the time, but low enough to put them in danger from a once-
in-a-generation storm. That storm was Hurricane Katrina, the eye of which made landfall
about 50 miles west near Waveland, Miss. Katrina brought a 20-foot storm surge to the
area, flooding 90 percent of Pascagoula and large parts of Moss Point. The storm killed
238 people in Mississippi, 14 in Jackson County, the county seat of which is Pascagoula.

Pascagoula’s wealthy oceanfront neighborhood along Beach Boulevard was swept
clean of nearly all houses—some of them stately antebellum mansions—within three
blocks of the beach. Several months after the storm, the neighborhood still looked much
like it did on Aug. 30. A few broken shells of homes remained, but most were reduced to
concrete slabs and foundations surrounded by piles of rubble. The heaps were littered
with the detritus of modern life—broken dishes, tattered clothing, trash bags and other
household sundries. Some lots had been cleared and outfitted with 20-foot trailers
provided as living quarters by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, but many
were abandoned and looked like they hadn’t been touched since the storm. Now, more
than three years after Katrina, the rubble has all been removed but no more than half of
the lots have new homes on them.

Moss Point fared better because it is not on the oceanfront and was sheltered from
the violent ocean swells—estimated to have been between 30 and 55 feet—that ravaged
Pascagoula, Gulfport and Waveland. Nearly all the homes were left standing, but many
were rendered uninhabitable by flood waters—as deep as 16 feet in the lowest-lying
areas—rising from the rivers and bayous. In neighborhoods close to the water, most
homes had FEMA trailers in their front yards or driveways for months and even years after the storm. A handful of residents, unable or unwilling to rebuild, still live in the trailers.

As in New Orleans 100 miles to the west, poverty—and by extension, race—was a key factor in which of Moss Point and Pascagoula’s residents were most affected by the storm. In New Orleans, poorer areas with more black residents tended to be lower lying and suffered the worst of the flooding. But in Moss Point and Pascagoula, the trend was reversed. Pascagoula has the area’s wealthiest neighborhoods and is nearly 70 percent white, and wealthier neighborhoods close to the ocean were the most affected by the storm. Moss Point, by contrast, is poorer and 70 percent black, and its less-than-prime location away from the ocean spared it the worst damage.

Riding Out the Storm

Most of First Christian Church’s approximately 150 members heeded the warnings of forecasters, government officials and their pastor and fled before the storm struck, but those who were brave or stubborn enough to stay will never forget the experience.

In Moss Point, hurricane-force winds from the storm’s more powerful eastern half began around 2 a.m. on Monday, Aug. 29, and lasted more than 12 hours. Doris Currie, who lives in a brick, ranch-style home safely above flood level, recalls huddling in her bathroom listening to the wind batter her house with debris and tear shingles off the roof. “It was terrifying,” she said. “It [sounded] like trains. I’ve never heard anything like it.
There were things just flying through the air.” Currie’s home suffered moderate roof
damage.

Robert and Karen Jones, who live about a quarter-mile from the Pascagoula River
on the west side of Moss Point, were not so lucky. Katrina’s 20-foot storm surge peaked
at about 8 a.m., coinciding with the morning high tide. The storm sent water surging up
the rivers and bayous in and around Moss Point, flooding much of the town. Karen Jones,
a 52-year-old health care worker and deacon at First Christian, and Robert Jones, a 59-
year-old shipyard worker and usher at the church, watched as water rising from the river
to the west and a bayou to the east converged and met in front of their modest one-story
brick home.

When the flood reached the doorstep only minutes later, Karen Jones pushed a
sleeping bag against the door jamb to keep the water at bay. It didn’t work. “I thought
there was gonna be a little bit [of water] coming in there, but it pushed [the sleeping bag]
right on down the hall,” she said. Within 10 minutes, the floodwaters were about three
feet deep inside the Joneses’ house, and they climbed onto their laundry machines to keep
dry. The water receded after 30 or 40 minutes, Karen Jones said, but the damage was
done. They estimate that about 90 percent of their possessions were ruined, and their
house was rendered uninhabitable because of mud, water damage and mold.

Residents of Moss Point and the entire Gulf Coast were desperate in the hours and
days after the floods receded. Power, water, telephones and cell phone service were
knocked out, and survivors had to scrounge for food, fuel and clean water during the first
few days. Currie took in and cared for three families who had lost their homes, and the
Joneses were forced to sleep under their carport for a week, barricading the open
structure with their cars to protect themselves from would-be looters. “Everything was chaotic,” Currie recalled. A few days after the storm, the Red Cross and National Guard arrived and began distributing food, water, medicine and other essentials to keep people alive.

Brooks, the pastor, fled upstate before the storm and returned the following Saturday. He recalls being shocked by the devastation he saw as he drove back toward the coast and his home in Gulfport. “When I came back, I didn’t really know what to expect,” Brooks said. “As I traveled that 200-mile journey and saw all that damage … it kind of prepared me for what I would see. When I drove up my driveway, I didn’t see the same house that I left. … It’s was heart-wrenching and devastating, it really was.” The storm blew his windows in, tore the garage door off, ripped holes in the roof and carried the front porch away. Fortunately, he was spared flood damage because his house is at a relatively high elevation near the interstate.

With their immediate needs taken care of thanks to outside aid, Moss Point residents took the first small steps toward cleaning up by hauling the destroyed remnants of their prior lives to heaps in the yard or along the curb. Many Katrina survivors recall the task as a singularly sad moment, an acknowledgement of how much they had lost. “You could see your whole life being moved from inside the house to the street,” Brooks said, shaking his head in sorrow. “Things that you worked so hard to get was gone … just like that.” Karen Jones made her husband clean out their bedroom because she knew somewhere inside was her most prized possession, a bag filled with family photos. “I had been looking for those pictures for weeks, and I finally found them when it was all over,” she said.
First Christian Church isn’t much to look at. The modest red brick building with a deteriorating asphalt parking lot is tucked away on a backstreet in a hard-scrabble, working-class neighborhood of Moss Point. It’s just “a little old church,” as Karen Jones puts it. But a church is more its people than its structure, and in the aftermath of the hurricane, church members and neighborhood residents turned to First Christian.

The church is on a small rise and escaped with only lost shingles and minor water damage from roof leaks, but the neighborhood surrounding it suffered some of the worst damage in Moss Point. A few hundred feet up Magnolia Street, flood waters from a swollen bayou reached 16 feet deep and killed an elderly man trapped in his attic.

Brooks began contacting his church members when he first returned to the Gulf Coast, a task complicated enormously by the lack of working phone lines and the numbers of displaced people. Through word of mouth, he reached many of his members and learned that while some had lost their homes, none had died. Brooks—who at the time had been pastor at First Christian for less than two years—also spread word that there would be church on Sunday morning, not yet a week after the storm hit.

Turnout was small, but those who could congregated in front of the church wearing whatever clothes they had rescued from the floods. It was a somber gathering. “We had prayer and a small sermon and sang some songs and went home,” Brooks recalled. “Everybody was just down, hurt, shocked. There were tears because some of our members lost everything. They went back where they were living, and there was just nothing there.”
Brooks was devastated by the damage to his home and had to care for his wife and four stepchildren, but his members still turned to him for strength and guidance. “It doesn’t matter how I felt; I couldn’t let that show,” he said. “I had to stand in front of my people and preach a service that was encouraging and uplifting to them. … I would say, ‘Hey baby, stand tight. We gonna rebuild.’”

Church provided a brief respite, but the members too quickly had to return to their ravaged homes and lives that suddenly seemed of another century. Power was out for three weeks in many parts of Moss Point, and the storm was followed by sweltering Mississippi heat. Many residents used fires or camping stoves to cook and heat water for bathing. The lack of electricity and a sundown curfew meant to prevent crime led most people to go to sleep at nightfall.

There was only so much residents could do to recover without basic services restored, so a reluctant acceptance took hold in the community. Their job was to survive each day and trust that things would gradually get better, said Robert Jones, a man of few words used to hardship, having lost a son a few months before the hurricane. “Just take one day at a time, and go from there,” he said in a gravelly Mississippi drawl. “Deal with it and pray and go on. That’s all you can do.”

In the days following Katrina, the community pulled together in ways it hadn’t before, Karen Jones recalled. With nearly everyone needing help in one way or another, neighbors turned to neighbors they barely knew. “We had people on the street we didn’t know, we didn’t talk to,” she said. “People were talking to each other, walking in the streets.” And the storm even eased some of the racial tensions between Moss Point and neighboring Pascagoula, Brooks said. “There were rich people who lived down at the
beachfront who would turn their nose up at you, and ... now you can go down and ...
they will embrace you just to have a shoulder to cry on,” he said.

“God’s Hands and His Feet”

Volunteers, in groups and as individuals, began arriving on the Gulf Coast a
couple of weeks after the storm. First Christian Church was part of the relief effort from
the beginning. Doctors and nurses from Portland, Ore., showed up in Moss Point and
needed a place to set up a community clinic, so Brooks offered the church. The sanctuary
was converted into an in-processing facility that could accommodate as many as 50
patients at a time, and a trailer was brought in to serve as an examination and treatment
room. The most common needs of the hundreds of Moss Point residents treated at the
makeshift clinic were tetanus shots for people exposed to filthy floodwaters and
medications for elderly patients and others with chronic conditions. Brooks said he is still
proud of First Christian’s selflessness in opening its doors to the community. “Even
though we needed help and were in the same situation that others were in, we can still
reach out and help those outside of our walls,” he said.

By late September, aid trucks from across the country flooded the Gulf Coast, and
First Christian and its members were well provisioned. “I said, ‘Look, we don’t need any
more food. It’s time to start rebuilding,’” Brooks recalled. The missions arm of Disciples
of Christ began sending work crews to Moss Point from churches as far flung as Iowa
and Washington state. Youth groups, college students on break, retirees and working
people—hundreds came to help for as little as a few days or as long as several months.
They gutted and rebuilt flooded homes, cleaned up storm debris and replaced ruined roofs. Brooks said the volunteers—many of them on vacation from their jobs—poured everything into their work, leaving dirty and exhausted. “These groups are God’s hands and his feet,” he said. “It’s nobody but the Lord.”

As pastor of the church, Brooks found himself de facto disaster recovery coordinator and host. The church became an official Disciples of Christ mission station, with boxes of supplies stored wherever there was room and out-of-town volunteers sleeping, eating and bathing in the church’s limited facilities. Eager to repay their guests in some small way, the First Christian women spent their days in the church kitchen preparing heaping platters of Southern favorites such as fried catfish, baked beans and cole slaw. No one was allowed to leave the table with room left in their stomachs. The volunteers were invited to weddings and parties and brought along on weekly bowling nights. “We’re talking Southern hospitality out of every door it could come out of, yes indeed,” Brooks boasted.

But by the end of the year, Brooks needed to get back to his day job at the shipyard and spend more time at home. Responding to a call from the Disciples of Christ missions organization, Mike Lee and Larry Baldauf, a 67-year-old retiree from Greenville, Ind., arrived in early January to manage the church’s recovery effort and the constant stream of volunteers. Lee lived out of his 20-foot travel trailer he parked next to the church, and Baldauf slept on a cot in a small room behind the sanctuary.

With full-time, on-site coordinators, the church’s relief effort hit full swing. Disciples of Christ churches across the country took up collections for hurricane relief, and the national organization sent the money to the First Christian aid station. Lee and
Baldauf visited the homes of those in need—including many people who weren’t members of First Christian—and sent volunteer work crews to provide the labor. They bought truckload upon truckload of lumber, shingles, tarpaper and drywall, and gave some families Home Depot gift cards so they could buy materials themselves. Both men said it was one of the most satisfying experiences of their lives. “These people think we’re coming down here to help them, but … we’re getting more out of it,” Lee said. “It’s selfish, but … we get a good feeling about what we’re doing.”

Among the recipients of the aid were the Joneses, who lived in a cramped FEMA trailer in their front yard from late September 2005 until the following summer. As with many people on the Gulf Coast, their insurance company covered only a small portion of the damage to their home because they did not have separate flood insurance, and basic insurance does not cover floods. They received a few thousand dollars for their roof damage, but it wasn’t nearly enough to rebuild. The church mission helped them buy sheetrock and other building supplies, and volunteers helped gut the house and rebuild the interior. Standing amid the construction debris and the few household possessions they were able to salvage from the flood, Karen Jones was overwhelmed by how much strangers had done for her. “There are no words in the English language,” she said. “They don’t come to sit around. They come to work. They don’t want to leave until it’s done.”

Every Sunday, church members moved the boxes of donated goods out of the sanctuary and held a worship service for members and the volunteers. First Christian is one of only a handful of black Disciples of Christ congregations, and this was many volunteers’ first experience in a black church. Services at most Disciples churches are relatively staid and feel much like a service at a typical mainline Protestant church, but
First Christian’s services are closer to what would be found at a black Southern Baptist meeting. The music is soulful gospel, and Brooks’ preaching style is spirited and musical. “We are a more high-spirited people,” Brooks said. “We seem to get involved, where [white churches] are just pretty much laid back.” Baldauf, a typically reserved Midwesterner, said he came to enjoy the services. “There’s a lot of amens and that type of thing going on,” he said. “It’s different here in the black community, [but] I think that’s brought me to appreciate what they are and how friendly they are.”

In the months following the storm, Brooks’ sermons usually focused on themes of perseverance and placing faith in God. One Biblical story he returned to frequently was the account of how the prophet Nehemiah relied on his faith in God to help rebuild Jerusalem after it was destroyed by the Babylonians. The message is clear: Seemingly impossible tasks become achievable when you place your faith in God. “That’s what people needed at the time,” he said.

By June 2006, nine months after the storm, First Christian’s members all had roofs over their heads and ongoing reconstruction projects had reached a point where church members could see them through. So after six months in Moss Point, Lee hitched up his trailer and drove 35 miles west on Interstate 10 to Gulfport, which suffered some of the worst damage from the storm but had barely begun to rebuild. Lee and other volunteers repaired flood damage to the Disciples of Christ church there, opened a new mission station and started their recovery work anew. More than three years after Hurricane Katrina, volunteers are still working to repair damaged homes in Gulfport. But they come in fewer numbers and less often than in 2006, Lee said, and large parts of
Gulfport near the ocean still have no new construction. “It’s forgotten down there,” he said. “It’s pretty sad.”

A Renewal of Faith

The storm and the rebuilding effort profoundly affected everyone involved, from those such as the Joneses who lost almost everything to men like Lee and Baldauf who learned how much they have to give.

Brooks said Katrina brought about a religious revival in the community. People came to church after the storm looking for aid and solace, and they have kept coming because faith and the church community help them endure a recovery process not yet complete. The First Christian mission station reached far beyond church members and became a recruiting tool to bring more people into the fold. “We have had people turn to God who … if you went to them [before] and asked them to come to church they’d probably look at you and say, ‘Get out of my face,’” Brooks said. “Since the devastation, the fear of God has taught their hearts. I have seen people in church who I didn’t never think I would see.”

Lee has been inspired by the hundreds of volunteers who have given their time and money to help people they didn’t even know. Such people are the measure of a church, he said, rather than how many members it has or how fancy its sanctuary is. “The people who are coming down here in my estimation are the best Christians in the world,” he said. “A lot of people never get outside their building, but these people are taking
vacation, they’re leaving their [families]. I mean they’re real Christians. I think that’s what we’re supposed to do.”

Many volunteers found their faith rejuvenated by the example of people who lost so much but remained generous, optimistic and steadfast in their faith. “They’ve helped me out tremendously [with] their faith,” Baldauf said. “How appreciative they are of us being down here; how they are sustained by God. These people will do anything for you, but they still have not got a house.”

For many who survived the hurricane and rebuilt their lives, the experience reaffirmed their belief that God will care for them during even the most difficult times. “I see our members being more serious about God now,” Brooks said. “They really recognize who God is and what God can do through others who have come to help.”

Hurricane Katrina was the rare event during which believers could see the vengeful and destructive God of the Old Testament and the compassionate and forgiving father of the New Testament present simultaneously. It is not uncommon in the region to hear that God sent the storm as punishment for the thriving gambling industry on the Gulf Coast and the hedonism of New Orleans. But Karen Jones said the compassionate God—the God of gospel hymns like *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*—is the one that made himself evident to her. “It’s kind of like the God I believe in is exactly like the Bible says he is,” she marveled. “Nothing’s too hard for God. All the things you hear, and the songs, they’re true.”
A Conscious Awakening: One Man’s Journey from Deadhead to Hare Krishna

The San Diego Hare Krishna Temple occupies an unlikely spot for a religious institution. The temple, built in a former movie theater, sits adjacent to a mixed martial arts shop selling gear and clothing for the ultra-violent sport, and it is two blocks removed from the bikini-clad beach throngs in the city’s booziest and most libidinous quarter. During the day, the busy thoroughfare on which the temple is located buzzes with beach traffic, and at night it hosts a parade of drunken pedestrians stumbling to and from the bars. This is Pacific Beach, the youthful neighborhood that has gained statewide notoriety as one of the last urban beaches that allows alcohol on the sand.

But inside the temple’s pink stucco walls, temperance and serenity prevail. Alcohol, tobacco, drugs, caffeine and meat are banned in the religion, and more often than not the only sound in the temple is that of a handful of monks chanting the Hare Krishna mantra. “Hare Krishna Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare, Hare Rama Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare,” they chant in hushed tones while fingeri ng strings of japa beads, their version of a rosary. They do this to clear their minds of distractions and vices and become closer to their God, the blue, flute-playing Hindu deity Krishna. The soft, repetitive chanting, the gurgling of a fountain in front of the altar, and the smell
of incense wafting through the sanctuary meld into a serenity that can lull even non-participants into a trance.

In contrast to the temple’s relatively unadorned façade, the sanctuary is a study in Eastern opulence. While modest in size at about 50 feet by 30 feet, every surface is extravagant. The floors are rich, cream-colored marble tile, and the plaster walls are divided into distinct bays demarcated by sculpted bas-relief pillars. Each bay is sheltered by a stylized arch, and beneath each arch is a painting, framed in gilded gold, depicting a scene from Krishna’s life, such as the time Krishna sheltered his followers from rains and floods by holding a mountain over their heads with a single finger. The 12-foot pillars are adorned by traditional Hindu figures of worshippers, called devotees, playing instruments and dancing for the pleasure of Krishna. Running around the top of the entire room are two horizontal friezes, also in bas-relief, festooned with an intricate, repetitive floral pattern in sky blue and soft pink. Friezes running along the floor depict sacred Hindu cows and another floral pattern. The dozens of plaster sculptures were hand-carved, painted and gilded with gold leaf by the monks who founded the San Diego temple in the late 1970s. They are maintained by the current monks with the same care and attention to detail shown by their predecessors.

The sanctuary is the focal point in the lives of the 15 or so Hare Krishna monks who call this place home. It is the one bit of extravagance for men—in this temple, women are not admitted as monks—who in all other ways have been stripped of pretense and excess. They have few possessions, earn no personal income, wear modest monk’s robes and spend all their waking hours in religious pursuits. They have ceased to be, in the words of one of the monks, “real Americans.”
Life Before Krishna

Giriraj Gopal Das, 27, spent five years as a Hare Krishna monk, first at a temple near Provo, Utah, and then in San Diego. While Giriraj no longer lives at the temple as a monk, he still looks and acts the part. His head is completely shaved except for a single lock of hair, or sikha, at the back of his head. His face is lightly smeared from the forehead to the bridge of his prominent nose with yellow clay from a sacred river in India. He wears loose white trousers and a brown T-shirt and wraps his shoulders and head with a green knit shawl. He is friendly, quick to smile, unfailingly polite and speaks in soft, measured tones. He is, for lack of a better word, monkly.

Giriraj is one of the San Diego temple’s more active and committed members, but as recently as 2000, he knew little about the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, or ISKON, the official name of the Hare Krishna movement. Like many Americans, he had seen the saffron-robed monks in airports, on street corners and in pop culture but knew little about their beliefs. “I just saw the movies, like ‘Airplane’ and ‘Cheech and Chong,’” he says. “I didn’t know anything.”

The modern Hare Krishna movement is a Hindu sect founded in New York in 1966 by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, a guru from Calcutta, India, who had come to the United States to spread his message the previous year. The movement traces its origins to the 16th century, when the scholar and monk Chaitanya Mahaprabhu rejected the polytheist teachings of mainstream Hinduism and instead espoused a monotheistic version of Vaishnavism, under which the Hindu god Vishnu is venerated as the one supreme being. The scriptural underpinnings of the Vaishnavist traditions are
ancient Hindu texts. The *Bhagavata Purana* is thought to have been written at least two millennia before the birth of Christ, and the *Bhagavad Gita* dates from around 500 B.C. These texts articulated the main Hare Krishna belief that Krishna, a Hindu deity known for good-natured mischief and playfulness, is the manifestation of Vishnu and is therefore the supreme being, or God.

But the movement is as much a lifestyle as it is a belief system, explains Chaitanya Bhagavad Dasa, 31, a priest sent to the San Diego temple from the ISKON headquarters in Mayapur, India. “We … offer personal practice, and people adapt this in their life,” he says. “They don’t just academically study what we are doing, but we encourage people to practice. And when they practice they see the transformation.” That practice takes the form of bhakti yoga, in which devotees strive to purify themselves of material concerns and become spiritually closer to Krishna, a state they called Krishna consciousness. They do this by chanting the Hare Krishna mantra to help them focus on God and by vowing to refrain from gambling; intoxication; eating meat, fish or eggs; and having illicit sex, defined as sex outside of marriage and, strictly speaking, as sex for reasons other than procreation.

Devotees believe in reincarnation, and their ultimate goal is to lead a spiritually pure enough life that they will be reincarnated not as a body but as a pure soul living with Krishna in the spiritual realm. The movement claims more than 10,000 monks and 250,000 devotees at some 350 temples worldwide, with the greatest numbers in India and the United States.

There was a time when Krishna asceticism was inconceivable to John Chavez, the name Giriraj Gopal Das went by before taking his formal Krishna initiation in 2006.
While Giriraj says he has always considered himself something of a spiritual seeker, he often turned to drugs, sex and a generally hedonistic lifestyle to fill the spiritual void he felt. (Giriraj considers his current Krishna life and his previous life as John Chavez to be distinct, so he will be referred to as Chavez when discussing events prior to his initiation into Krishna.)

Chavez was born in 1981 in Winnemucca, Nev., a small mining town on an empty stretch of Interstate 80 between Reno and Salt Lake City. His parents, who divorced when he was 3 years old, worked for gold-mining operations, the principle employer in the town of about 7,500. Winnemucca is home to at least seven casinos and five legal brothels, which combine with the mining industry to provide decent, if not exactly wholesome, livelihoods for most of the residents.

Chavez lived primarily with his mother, but he inherited his spirituality from his father, who immigrated to the United States from El Salvador. His father went through a spiritual awakening and became a born-again Christian when his son was about 10 years old, and Chavez sometimes accompanied him to church services. Giriraj recalls he didn’t like going to church and never had an affinity for Christianity. “I was completely unsatisfied with Christian ideas,” he says. “I just had an image of God as he’s forcing us to serve him and if we don’t, we’ll go to hell.” But even then Chavez recognized in himself a desire for a more spiritual life, if not the kind his father had chosen. “I liked the idea of God, and I always felt to take shelter in God is natural,” he recalls. “I remember being little [and] just praying when I was suffering, [but] as soon as the suffering’s gone I would forget.”
The troubles began during his teenage years. At 13, Chavez joined a heavy-metal band as a guitarist and started hanging out with a raucous, hard-partying crowd. He began experimenting with drugs and alcohol and cared less and less about school. “As far as the education, I just felt like I wasn’t getting what I wanted or needed,” Giriraj says. “Back then I was just frustrated with school, and I wanted to enjoy social life and partying.” He finally dropped out of high school in 1997 when he was 16, left home and moved to Reno to live with friends.

In Reno, Chavez became a self-described hippie and Deadhead, the terms describing ardent fans of the Grateful Dead and participants in the psychedelic, drug-oriented counterculture they spawned. He sold drugs and worked occasional odd jobs to pay rent and fund his partying, and he added dreadlocks and a beard to his already stout frame and dark features. Looking older and more world-weary than his actual age, Chavez spent much of his free time cultivating his vices at casinos, racetracks, bars and parties. By 1999, at 18, he had transitioned into harder drugs and was headed for a burn-out.

The breaking point came in 2000. Giriraj recalls sitting in a bar with friends in Reno and thinking that no one looked happy, despite their intoxication. “They looked really depressed and … really desperate,” he says. “I remember telling one of my friends, ‘I don’t think people are really enjoying this.’ … I was like, ‘I gotta get the heck out of here.’ So I left.” He moved away from Reno and spent the next year and a half traveling the West Coast, going to concerts, doing lots of drugs and living the hippie dream. For most of the time, he and a few friends lived out of a van. “I thought I was going against
the grain,” Giriraj says, with a hint of self-mockery. “I’m a hippy. I don’t have to work. Everyone else is chained to their job.’ I thought that was so cool.”

While Giriraj recalls this period as the time of his most intensive drug use and partying, he says it also is what ultimately led him to his salvation from that lifestyle through Hare Krishna. The Deadhead scene reveres psychedelic drugs such as LSD for their supposed ability to expand consciousness, and followers of Eastern and New Age religions are common at the concerts and festivals that serve as the focal point of the culture. “I was doing way more partying than I was doing before, but it was with a different kind of people,” Giriraj says. “It was still the same drug-induced crazy scene, but it was, like, up a notch. We were doing psychedelics, but we were also trying to be more enlightened. … We were into self-discovery. That really provoked my mind.”

Chavez began exploring various mystical religious practices, including shamanism, ancient Egyptian religions, New Age crystal worship and the Mayan traditions of his father’s native El Salvador. “I kept changing my strategy because I was looking for a more fulfilling way of life,” he says. “I was really feeling a lot of this stuff.”

But none of it took hold until Chavez stumbled upon Hare Krishna.

**The First Encounter**

Chavez’s first meaningful encounter with the Hare Krishna movement came in 2000, while he was still deep in his drug phase and following a concert tour of Bob Dylan and Grateful Dead bassist Phil Lesh down the West Coast. At a music festival in San Francisco, an older hippie couple befriended Chavez and gave him a book, *The Hidden*
History of the Human Race, which was written by Krishna devotees and purports to
disprove the theory of human evolution. (Krishnas, like followers of many other
religions, believe God created humans as we are today.) The couple also gave Chavez a
button depicting the form of Krishna that protects devotees.

“I used to just stare at the button because I thought it was just trippy or whatever,”
Giriraj says. While he did not immediately begin exploring Krishna theology, this chance
encounter at a festival planted the seed of his later conversion.

Several months later, in 2001, Chavez attended the Burning Man festival, a large
annual gathering in the Nevada desert known for its hedonism and emphasis on self-
expression and individuality. The week-long festival, attended by 50,000 or more artists,
hippies and assorted other seekers and revelers, culminates in the ritualistic burning of an
80-foot wooden effigy. As Chavez and his companions drove to the festival that year in
their communal van, one of the friends dominated conversation with an account of his
recent encounter with a group of Krishna devotees. “I guess he had a really good
experience, because he was telling us everything about Krishna the whole ride,” Giriraj
says. “I remembered hearing it and I was kind of like, ‘Whatever, don’t preach,’ you
know.”

Paradoxically, it was an intense drug experience at Burning Man a few days later
that ultimately led Chavez to the asceticism of the Krishna lifestyle. After taking what
Giriraj describes as the biggest dose of LSD he had ever taken, he lost control of his mind
and was forced to assess the state of his life—a disturbing prospect when in the grasp of a
psychedelic drug. “All these deep things, like what am I doing with my life? They all
started to come,” he said. “Then I started to pray to God. I don’t even know how it came
about, but I was just … praying for knowledge, praying for guidance. And then … I remember drinking some water at that point, and I had the realization that this is God, the water. … I could actually almost feel God, like a personality, in the water.”

It sounds like your garden variety drug-induced spirituality, and it was. But soon after the festival, while recuperating at a friend’s house, Chavez stumbled upon the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Hindu scripture that is the basis of the Hare Krishna movement, on a bookshelf. At random, he recalls, he opened to Chapter 7 of the text and read a verse: “I am the taste in water, O son of Kunti, the light in the sun and moon.” It hit him like a bolt of lightning. This is what I experienced, Chavez thought. Also on the shelf was *The Journey of Self Discovery*, one of the more than 80 books written or translated by Swami Prabhupada, the Krishna consciousness founder. The book outlines the Krishna philosophy and how devotees can come closer to God by purifying themselves and serving spirituality rather than the cravings of their senses. “When I read it I immediately knew this was it,” Giriraj says. “From the first page it just hit. Everything I learned from my other studies, this book just summed it up.” He read the book three times consecutively, cover to cover.

Giriraj says he knew that many people considered Hare Krishna a cult, but he rejects the term as meaningless. To many religion scholars, what is or is not a cult is in the eye of the beholder, and one man’s cult can be another man’s salvation. The religious sociologists Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, in their seminal 1987 work, *A Theory of Religion*, argue that a cult is “a deviant religious organization with novel beliefs and practices” rather than traditional beliefs and practices. That definition hinges on the societal reference point, and who defines what is novel and what is traditional. An
anonymous author, writing on Wikipedia, argues that under the Stark and Bainbridge definition, the Hare Krishna movement would be considered a cult in the United States, where it is undeniably novel. But in India, the author writes, the movement is considered just one of many Hindu groups following fairly orthodox Hindu teachings and traditional scriptures.

Stark and Bainbridge also write that cults tend to be new movements and become accepted religions if they last long enough. The Mormon church is an example. Mormons were widely considered a cult in the mid-1800s when they were a relatively new fringe group in armed conflict with the federal government, but it is hard to consider the church a cult today, when it has some 13 million members worldwide. (Some do still consider Mormonism a cult.) The Hare Krishna movement, founded just more than 40 years ago, seems to meet this newness test of defining a cult.

Finally, Stark and Bainbridge argue that cults are defined by tension with broader society. While there has been tension between the Hare Krishna movement and American society—notably a long series of court cases regarding devotees’ right to proselytize in airports—most temples have reasonably good relationships with their communities. Hare Krishna festivals at the San Diego temple draw large crowds because of their food, music and celebratory atmospheres, for example, and Mormons donated about $25,000 and some 3,000 hours of volunteer labor to help construct an elaborate Krishna temple in the Mormon heartland near Provo.

But none of this mattered to Chavez. “I was actually tired of how people stereotyped things, so [with] any spiritual group, I wouldn’t just take how people stereotype them. I would try to see for myself,” he says.
After Burning Man, Chavez moved to Salt Lake City with his girlfriend and took a low-wage job as a telemarketer. But his primary occupation was to read Krishna literature, begin divorcing himself from his previous lifestyle and try to live by Krishna principles. It was a daunting task for a young man, then just 20, who had spent the previous four years indulging his appetites. “In the beginning I was like, ‘I’ll never be able to do this,’” Giriraj recalls. But after years of hard partying, he had burnt himself out and had lost much of his desire for drugs. He threw himself into what he imagined as the Krishna lifestyle, and he says it was easier than he expected. But Chavez was alone, making it up as he went along. “I didn’t know any devotees,” he says. “I didn’t know Hare Krishnas, and I had never been at temple. I really didn’t know how to practice.”

Then Chavez’s manager at the telemarketing firm invited him to a festival at the temple in Spanish Fork, near Provo. It was his first experience with the Krishna organization and devotees rather than the texts alone. He was eager to try the faith out. “When I first got there I knew so much from just reading the books,” Giriraj says. “I wanted to try the chanting. I wanted to try the food that was offered. … I was seeing, do they really live by this?” He was impressed with what he saw and heard, and he began spending nearly every weekend at the temple, learning about the religion and helping with menial jobs like cleaning the temple, washing dishes and working on the temple’s llama farm. Cleaning and doing menial work is a foundation of the transition to a Krishna lifestyle, explains Chaitanya, the San Diego priest. “That’s where you start,” he says. “It
is said in the scriptures when you clean the temple, you are actually cleaning the heart, which is the temple of the Lord.”

He spent weekends at the temple for about a year, until in 2002 he decided to fully dedicate himself to the movement and live by its principles. That meant no meat, no intoxicating substances of any kind and no sex. It was a bridge too far for his girlfriend, with whom he was living in Salt Lake City, about an hour north of the temple. “She liked the devotees and she liked the chanting, but as soon as I started following the principles, then she was just like, ‘You’re going crazy,’” Giriraj recalls. “One night I told her … these are the ideals I want to live by, [and] literally that night it broke off.” It was his last connection to the non-Krishna world. The next day he moved into the temple in Spanish Fork.

Chavez left behind his material possessions and donned the saffron robes of a celibate Krishna monk. He had already been living a materially austere, alternative lifestyle for several years, he says, so leaving behind his few possessions and mainstream American culture was easy. “I guess I was lucky because I didn’t have those attachments,” Giriraj says. “When I went in [as a monk] I wasn’t feeling a need to watch Judge Judy. I didn’t have much, anyways.”

Like all brahmacharya monks—the first stage of traditional yoga, also know as the student or celibate life—Chavez dedicated his entire life to religious practice. Hare Krishna monks rise by 4 a.m. every day to bathe and prepare for the day, and at 4:30 a.m. the priest opens the altar curtains so devotees can pray to the deity figures that are the focal point of the temple sanctuary. At the center of the elaborate altar in San Diego, as in all temples, are white marble statues of Krishna and Radha, described as the wife or
female incarnation of Krishna. The deities, richly painted and clothed in colorful Hindu finery, are elevated on a tiered marble platform and framed by ornate archways carved from plaster and gilded with gold. Surrounding the statues are Indian tapestries, smaller statuary and offerings of fresh flowers, food and incense. The altar also has similarly ornate statues of Gaura and Nitai, two divine brothers who, according to tradition, created the practice of chanting Krishna’s name. The effect is remarkably similar to what a traveler might see at a Hindu temple in India.

At 5 a.m., temple priests close the altar curtains once again so they can bathe the deities and change them from their night clothes to their more elaborate day clothes. Outside the closed curtains, the monks and sometimes a few other devotees spend the next two hours chanting the Hare Krishna mantra: “Hare Krishna Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare, Hare Rama Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare.” They chant the mantra once for each of the 108 japa beads on their strand, and they chant the entire strand 16 times. That is a total of 1,728 mantras. It can take beginners four or more hours to do this, but it takes monks and dedicated devotees about two hours. At about 7:15 or 7:30 a.m., after the chanting, the altar curtains are reopened and the devotees bow and touch their foreheads to the marble floor in deference to the now finely dressed deities.

Next, the devotees move to a separate, simpler altar, off to the left, that has an eerily lifelike figure of Swami Prabhupada, the movement’s founder, sitting on a throne. Unlike the stylized deity statues, the figure of Swami Prabhupada looks like it belongs in a wax museum. It wears simple saffron robes and a cream-colored shawl and has a garland of fresh flowers around its neck. The figure sits, appropriately enough, Indian-style, the term referring not to Native Americans but to the Indian yoga position. The
devotees greet the guru, wafting incense and saying prayers, until 8 a.m. After an hour-long class and discussion of Krishna philosophy, they eat a simple breakfast, often a rice porridge called poha.

From 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., the monks leave the temple to do mission work and raise money. They usually go to colleges, concerts, cultural festivals or neighborhoods with a lot of pedestrians, where they talk about their beliefs, hand out literature and ask for donations in return. These activities are most Americans’ only experience with Hare Krishnas, and the devotees become accustomed to being treated like outcasts. “A lot of people think that we’re fanatics,” Giriraj says. “I hear a lot of people talking when they walk by, like, ‘Oh, they’re crazy Hare Krishnas.’ Some people think … there’s no philosophy behind it, like it’s just some cult.” The devotees offer well-scripted answers to those who attack their beliefs or accuse them of trying to brainwash young people.

Chaitanya relates a story from the early days after Swami Prabhupada came to the United States in the late 1960s: “When somebody approached our spiritual master and said, ‘Everyone says you are brainwashing Americans,’ he says, ‘Yeah, the brain is full of dirt and we are washing the brain off, of drugs, of meat-eating, intoxication.’”

Sometimes, the devotees encounter people—usually young people—who are open to Krishna beliefs. Contrary to stereotypes of the movement and his conversion experience, Giriraj says hippies usually don’t make the best candidates to recruit to Hare Krishna because of their frequent drug use and lack of discipline. The transition to the austerity of Krishna is too much for most of them, he says. Instead, they look for people with a spiritual inclination dissatisfied with society’s materialism. And many people come to the movement through the culture rather than the religious beliefs. “We put on a
lot of festivals, where there is music and dance and plays,” Chaitanya says. “A lot of people are attracted to the culture.”

After a full day on the streets, the monks return to the temple and spend a few hours doing chores, organizing special projects such as festivals and outreach efforts, or reading. They eat a dinner of traditional Indian, vegetarian food, close the altar at 7 p.m. and begin winding down the day. They go to sleep on bunk beds in a shared dormitory by 9 p.m. or 9:30 p.m. most nights.

The Next Chapter

Chavez lived this spartan, all-consuming lifestyle for three years in Utah and a year and a half in San Diego before taking his formal Hare Krishna initiation in October 2006. He left the name John Chavez behind and became Giriraj Gopal Das, and he became a disciple of a Krishna guru who lives in India and travels the world teaching for the movement. “You’re basically taking discipleship of somebody who also took discipleship,” Giriraj says. “This is the way that we pass down this knowledge, because we just don’t want to pass down knowledge, we want to pass down a whole culture of understanding.” The initiation is a significant milestone in a Krishna devotee’s life, marking the end of a previous life and the beginning of a new one devoted only to Krishna. Not all devotees become initiated, as it signifies a greater level of commitment than the casual temple-goer.

About a year after taking initiation, Giriraj decided that his period as a brahmacharya, or student, was over and that he would move on to the grahasta, or
householder, phase of his practice, during which he is expected to marry and have
children. Like the initiation, the timing of his graduation to the grahasta stage was his
own choice to make when he felt he was ready. This stage required that he exchange his
saffron, celibate-mono’s robes for the white robes of a grahasta. He also had to move out
of the San Diego temple and begin forging a new life in the outside world. It was a
bittersweet occasion for Giriraj, marking the completion of his student years but also
forcing him to leave behind the spiritual refuge of the temple. “There are things I miss
about it,” he says. “I had a fraternity of all the monks. … But there’s new things [now]. I
enjoy having my own space. [I] start to develop my individual identity more.”

Giriraj now rents a small bedroom in a suburban San Diego house owned by a
married Krishna couple. The room is furnished frugally, with a bed, dresser, chair and a
low bench that serves as an altar. “We keep it simple,” he says. The walls are decorated
with Indian tapestries and a large photo of his personal guru, but the centerpiece of the
room is the altar. The bench is covered with an embroidered cloth and holds various
devotional objects: cups of water for the deities, candles, a small bell and incense holder,
fresh flowers and a plate on which to make food offerings. On the wall behind the bench,
forming the back of the altar, are pictures of Krishna and Radha, Swami Prabhupada and
the 16th-century monk Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the forefather of the Krishna movement.

Giriraj still rises early, at about 6 a.m., and spends two hours each morning
meditating and chanting the Hare Krishna mantra the required 1,728 times. He makes the
20-minute drive to the temple every other day to teach, worship or visit with the monks.
But the rest of his time he gets to spend in personal pursuits. He is enrolled in a computer
engineering program at a local college, and he earns a modest income by doing freelance Web design.

He also has a girlfriend, Kunti, who he has been dating since early 2008. She, too, is a Krishna devotee, and they met through the San Diego temple. They date much like a non-Krishna couple would, sharing meals and hanging out, but their relationship is defined by a shared respect for Krishna principles such as vegetarianism and abstinence from intoxicating substances and sex outside of marriage. “You’re going to date someone you’re interested in, who has the same likes and dislikes,” Giriraj says. “I’m looking for a wife, so I want to find somebody who has similar characteristics.”

Almost seven years after his conversion to the Krishna lifestyle, Giriraj retains few connections to his life as John Chavez. He is close with his mother, who he says is happy that he no longer uses drugs and has found a fulfilling life. But he stays in touch with just one friend from his younger days, someone he grew up with in Winnemucca but has spent that last several years in and out of jail. With everyone else, there is just too little in common. “I feel like I have no relation with them any more,” Giriraj says. “Everyone else sees this world as a means to give their senses pleasure. … We’re saying no, you’re never going to be happy that way because our nature is to love, and the only way to love is by service” to God.

Like many religious people, Giriraj says he believes God had a plan for him all along, even if he didn’t realize it when he was confused about life and relied on drugs to give him peace. He points to the chance occurrences that brought him to the Hare Krishna movement: the encounter with the hippie couple in San Francisco, the friend who couldn’t stop talking about Krishna, the bad acid trip that turned into a revelation, and the
Hare Krishna books he found on a friend’s bookshelf. These all happened at the times when he most needed help. “The way I look at it, I didn’t do anything,” Giriraj says. “It was all Krishna. For all those occurrences to add up to where I am now, it’s not a coincidence. Looking back, I can see God bringing me here.”
Chapter 4

Reporting on God: Lessons Learned

Religion remains one of the most potent forces in modern American society, despite what some lament as our increasingly secular culture. Drive down the street in any American city—from the Bible Belt to the liberal Northeast—and you’re likely to find a church or synagogue or, increasingly, a mosque or temple. God is so ingrained in our culture that it seems a stretch to imagine an atheist or agnostic American president. A Muslim? Maybe someday. An atheist? Doubtful.

Yet for all its importance, it is evident that much of the media do an inadequate job covering the issue. There is thoughtful, probing journalism out there that explores the changing role of faith in society and how churches are evolving to serve the needs of their members. This is important work, and deservedly continues to grace the covers of national magazines and the best newspapers.

But there is also a glut of work that cynically reports mostly the bad news—the prominent preacher outed as gay, the latest clergy sexual abuse scandal or a suicidal fringe religious group—without giving the same attention to good works done by people of faith and the continuing importance of God in the lives of most Americans. Studies by institutions such as the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Ford
Foundation have found that faith, as a routine part of Americans’ lives, simply does not get as much attention in the news as the scandals and controversies.

It is difficult to pin down exactly how well—or poorly—journalists are covering religion. There is a notable lack of research allowing one to characterize religion coverage even in the broadest terms, and the literature is silent on many important questions: What percentage of daily newspapers has a religion reporter on staff? Are most religion reporters on the beat full time, or do they cover other beats as well? Are publishers cutting religion reporters in the face of shrinking budgets, or have they deemed the issue important enough to keep the positions? Are small markets getting locally produced religion coverage, or must they depend solely on the wire services? Are reporters and editors taking greater interest in diverse religions, and are they covering non-Western religions fairly? Answers to these and other questions will help us better understand the religion news Americans are getting and how media outlets, professional societies and journalism schools can provide audiences with a better product.

This project is an attempt to see what happens when a journalist takes faith as the starting point and turns an eye to subjects that otherwise likely would not be covered. In reporting the stories, I consciously tried to emulate the thoughtfulness and nuance of the best religion reporting and counteract the perceived weaknesses of lesser religion reporting. I stayed away from politics and political issues as much as possible; I made sure to learn about the theology and doctrine of each of the faiths I was covering; and I tried to avoid playing into stereotypes attached to various religions. My over-arching goal in the project was to respectfully and thoughtfully explore the role of faith for people who were kind enough to open their lives to me.
I was struck most by the generosity and openness of nearly everyone I met. They not only tolerated me, but made me feel welcome. In Moss Point, Miss., the church women stuffed me full of fried catfish and beans and offered to let me sleep in the church (I declined); at the Hare Krishna temple in San Diego, I joined the monks for an Indian food buffet and hung out with them in their dormitory. The AbdelBakys in Raleigh, N.C., invited me into their family gatherings and patiently answered all my questions about Islam. For each of the profiles, most of the subjects were eager to discuss their faith and what it means to them. My effort to understand their beliefs was well-received, and the subjects seemed comfortable that I was genuinely trying to understand them rather than hold them up to curiosity and ridicule. And, as with so much reporting, the more open I was in discussing my own thoughts and perspectives, the more thoughtful and open were the subjects and the better the final product.

Many of the people I interviewed at some point commented on the similarities between theirs and other religions. “We have a lot of common things between Islam, Christianity and Judaism,” said Samy AbdelBaky. “We believe the God for all these religions is the same … so the core value in the majority of the religions, you may find it thoroughly similar.” AbdelBaky explained how Islam—like Christianity and Judaism—is an Abrahamic faith and reveres Moses and Jesus as prophets. Giriraj Gopal Das, the Hare Krishna devotee, told me how after a lifetime of rejecting Christianity he had come to respect many of its teachings. “The teachings that Jesus is speaking are very intricate, and it’s some of the highest philosophy you’ll find,” he said. Some of the Christians in Moss Point also mentioned the similarity between religions, but it was not a point of emphasis as with the Muslim family and Krishna devotees. For the Muslims and Krishnas I
interviewed—who are accustomed to being misunderstood and stereotyped—it was as if
they were saying, “See, we’re not so different from the rest of you.” It suggests that they
believe their religions are not fully accepted in American society, and they are eager to
gain the acceptance others have found.

But it was more than an attempt to show they belong; it was a heartfelt belief that
religion should be a source of shared experience rather than division. The three faiths
profiled share a common set of morals and values that embraces kindness, generosity,
honesty, charity and sexual restraint. “The morals are almost exactly the same,” said
Omar AbdelBaky. And while most of these are values that nearly everyone espouses, I
felt that the people I met while reporting for this project lived these values more fully
than most people I know. The experience reinforced a belief I have long held that
religion—despite the detestable acts and outrageous opinions sometimes justified in its
name—has a valuable role in instilling basic decency. You won’t find more
fundamentally decent people than the dedicated father Samy AbdelBaky and the itinerant
volunteer Mike Lee.

Each of the faiths profiled also has a concept of a worshiper’s personal
relationship with God. Rather than an unknowable, impersonal deity, the God of the
AbdelBakys, Giriraj, and Robert and Karen Jones is accessible and communicates with
his followers. Many of the people I interviewed described an experience in which they
felt God communicating with them, usually during a time of need or uncertainty. For
Samy AbdelBaky, it was a sense of calm and certainty he felt when he interviewed for
the job that brought him and his family to North Carolina. For Lester Brooks, it was God
calling him to be the pastor of First Christian Church. And for Giriraj, it is the personal connection he feels each morning during his meditation before an image of Lord Krishna.

Finally, the Christians, Muslims and Krishnas profiled worship a merciful and loving rather than a vengeful God. Perhaps it has something to do with that relentless American optimism, but the profile subjects tended to view God as a deity who takes care of and nurtures rather than punishes us. “We believe that God is with us every single moment,” Samy AbdelBaky said. “If you make a mistake, just ask God for forgiveness. He is the most forgiving.” And they all believe that God helps them in times of need, such as Hurricane Katrina. “I know we’re blessed,” Robert Jones told me as he stood outside his gutted home.

One thing I encountered that I had not anticipated was the Muslims and Krishnas were generally more skilled and eager to discuss their religion than were the Christians. With the AbdelBakys and the Krishna devotees, it was obvious that they had experience explaining their beliefs to outsiders and knew which common misconceptions they wanted to dispel. The Muslims I interviewed wanted me to understand that Islam rejects violence, and the Krishnas emphasized that they are not brainwashed cult members.

This project allowed me to meet generous, kind and inspiring people who are examples of the best of what faith can do in people’s lives. They stand in stark contrast to the stereotypes of people of faith that we sometimes encounter in the media. Rather than intolerant, hateful and strident, the people I met were mostly open-minded, generous and kind.

Most American news consumers are religious, and they deserve coverage that addresses this most important area of life with seriousness, depth and sensitivity. The
reporting by Newsweek’s Kenneth Woodward and other dedicated reporters shows what is possible in religion reporting, and what readers should by all rights demand. It is up to reporters, editors and producers to take the issue of religion seriously and give it the attention it deserves.


INTERVIEWS


Caru Das. Phone interview, February 21, 2009.


