

CHURCH CURIOUS
A FINNISH JOURNALIST'S JOURNEY THROUGH AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY

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“The religious atmosphere of the country was the first thing that struck me on arrival in the United States. The longer I stayed in the country, the more conscious I became of the important political consequences resulting from this novel situation.

In France I had seen the spirits of religion and of freedom almost always marching in opposite directions. In America I found them intimately linked together in joint reign over the same land.”

– Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835)

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Abstract

This narrative thesis examines the role of Christianity in contemporary American society from the perspective of a Finnish journalist living in Los Angeles during Donald Trump's second presidential term. Through conversations and encounters with pastors, scholars and parishioners across Southern California, as well as a reporting trip to rural Alabama, it explores the many forms Christianity takes in the United States.

The thesis takes readers to megachurches, Catholic Masses, a sound bath in a historic church and a small airplane flying over California's wine country, while comparing the place and significance of religion in Finland and the United States. It also examines the recent revival of Catholicism, particularly among Generation Z, and the growing role of religion in American politics and public life.

Ultimately, the thesis asks not only what Christianity means in America today, but also what it means to someone who has long considered herself secular and believed religion had little to do with her own life.

Chapter One: Introduction

A parallel reality isn't far away, one in which you would now be reading a very different story. I originally set out to report on incarcerated women serving sentences of more than 20 years. But after a series of interviews, something felt off. The narrative wouldn't hold, and more importantly, the story didn't feel like mine to tell.

At the same time, my attention was pulled elsewhere in the country I had been calling home for six months. During Donald Trump's second presidential term, Christian nationalism returned to the headlines. Religious leaders spoke out about ICE raids in cities across the country after the administration lifted decades-old restrictions on enforcement at or near churches. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth justified a U.S. strike on Iran by citing biblical verses. Trump, in turn, posted an AI-generated image of himself as Jesus.

After more than six years working as a broadcast reporter in Finland, I took a yearlong study leave to attend a university in California. As a Nordic newcomer to the United States, I found the presence of Christianity in everyday American life highly visible, at times excessive. Religion appeared to occupy a central place in public life, and I felt increasingly inquisitive about whether its influence was growing.

I soon realized I wasn't the first European to be puzzled by what Tocqueville called America's "religious atmosphere."

“My longing to understand the reason for this phenomenon increased daily,” wrote the young French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville nearly two centuries ago. “Democracy in America,” published in 1835, became his study of democracy and religion in the United States.

Tocqueville, the third son of a noble family, was born in Paris in 1805. After finishing his law studies, he secured an 18-month leave of absence from his position at the Ministry of Justice, officially to study American prison reforms. But the prisons provided a reason to make the journey. In reality, Tocqueville was interested in a much bigger question: how and why democracy worked in this new nation, particularly in the aftermath of the July Revolution in his homeland.

He became absorbed by the country’s political institutions and soon realized how deeply freedom, democracy and religion were intertwined. What he observed in America seemed to him part of something happening far beyond the United States.

“Wherever one looks one finds the same revolution taking place throughout the Christian world,” he wrote.

Nearly two centuries later, we are again asking questions about the state of American democracy and watching political currents and culture wars travel across the Atlantic. Religious currents travel, too. Yet while the health of democracy is widely discussed and debated in Europe, the role of religion receives far less attention.

Lauren Jackson, a religion journalist at The New York Times, has asked why we no longer talk about meaning or eternity in public life. “Religion is dominating American politics and culture, but many people struggle to talk about it, especially with those who might disagree with them,” she wrote in [April 2025](#).

My questions were slightly different from Tocqueville’s, but I decided to borrow from his approach and “question the faithful of all communions.” I wanted to learn how to discuss faith with some fluency and also understand its place in American society. But unlike Tocqueville, a practicing Catholic, I am not affiliated with any faith. I have long considered myself secular.

Like most children in Finland, I was baptized into the Evangelical Lutheran Church. At 15, I attended confirmation camp, as nearly everyone does, though I was more interested in sneaking out at night with friends than in spiritual reflection. The following summer, I returned as a volunteer youth instructor.

At 18, I decided to leave the church. In Finland, it's done simply by filling out a form online. There were several reasons: the church tax, values that no longer aligned with mine, and the simple fact that I did not believe in God. In fact, I don’t think I ever did.

I haven’t looked back since.

They say that you have to travel far to see what is close. In my case, that proved true. What began as a straightforward reporting project turned into a personal attempt to understand what Christianity means in the United States today and what it means to me.

I expected to spend time in megachurches, and perhaps trace the history of Christian nationalism. Instead, I landed on smaller, more personal stories, including those rooted in the Lutheran faith I thought I already understood and had even considered a somewhat dull subject in Finland.

The story begins in the air.

Chapter Two: The God You Don't Believe In

“Who do you trust more now, God or me?” the pastor asks in Finnish as we fly above California’s wine country.

I’m not sure what the right answer is, but I tell him I trust him, if only because he is the one holding the controls of the small plane, a white and dark green Cessna 172 built in 1964. In my mind, it defies the basic rules of physics that this plane is still airborne. The interior looks slightly worn, the engine whirring loudly, yet it takes off, flies and lands with an odd steadiness.

Pastor Jarmo Tarkki has asked the same question of previous passengers, including two Finnish bishops. They, too, chose Tarkki over God while gliding through the sky. I have another question in mind, whether the plane has parachutes in case of an emergency, but I don’t ask it. It’s probably safer not to know.

Tarkki steers us over Rancho del Cielo, Ronald Reagan’s 688-acre ranch near Santa Barbara, where the president used to spend time riding horses. We pass Michael Jackson’s Neverland Ranch, now known as Sycamore Valley Ranch, where he built a private fantasy world of roller coasters and a zoo.

When instructions come through the headsets, Tarkki listens closely, his expression tightening for a moment before easing again. He is in his early 70s, with slightly overgrown gray hair, a

neatly kept beard and dark, angular glasses. He dresses casually, mostly in black, with a green bomber jacket. There is something boyish in his expression, especially when he laughs.

“Now it’s Pylvänäinen’s turn,” Tarkki says, gesturing toward the second set of controls in front of me.

Without much instruction, I find myself flying the plane at about 1.2 miles above the ground, my palms sweating, my body tense. The aircraft responds to the slightest movement, and steering is harder than it looks. Not just left and right, but up and down. The trick, Tarkki says, is to do as little as possible. My thoughts start to race. I try to distract myself by focusing on country singer Kacey Musgraves’ voice playing in our headsets—a change from the classical music he had been playing in the house the night before. I fix my gaze on a mountain on the horizon, but still find myself wondering how I got here. At that moment, I realized that in Finnish, my native language, there is only one word for both sky and heaven: *taivas*. A random, almost unnecessary, detail I hadn’t thought of before.

After what feels like an eternity, I hand the controls back to Tarkki and realize I haven’t really been breathing. I can finally return to admiring the landscape beneath us—the green hills, the vineyards and the sea shimmering in the distance. We land in San Luis Obispo, drive to a Thai restaurant for lunch, then fly back to the Santa Ynez Valley, where Tarkki keeps his plane near his home in Solvang. In the afternoon, we go straight to a wine tasting hosted by his partner, Anita, and I find out that there were no parachutes. Tarkki assures me he knows how to land without an engine, gliding down to a field or a golf course. A more serious problem, he adds, would be if the wings came off.

When we first met at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Santa Monica, I told Tarkki I was interested in writing about Christianity in the United States from a Finnish perspective, without mentioning the political aspect. Early on, he recommended a book, "The Violent Take It by Force: The Christian Movement That Is Threatening Our Democracy," by religious studies scholar Matthew D. Taylor. He then went on at length about Christian nationalism, a topic he had spoken about the previous summer at FinnFest, a festival for Finnish Americans. For him, the people involved in the movement are "crooks," including figures in the current administration, such as Donald Trump, Pete Hegseth and Trump's spiritual adviser, Paula White.

"I've said there are two kinds of Christian nationalists and megachurch pastors: the ones who've been caught and the ones who will be," Tarkki said. "It's always the same pattern. There's sex stuff and money stuff, every time."

For Tarkki, the rise of the religious right in the United States is, at its core, about power. He sees it as a reaction, almost in the terms of Newton's law: every movement produces a countermovement. As women's rights have advanced, backlash has followed. The weakened position of white men is key to understanding this shift, he argued.

Our conversation eventually turned to the uncertainty of the times we are living in. Jobs feel less secure, and even those with university degrees are struggling to achieve the standard of living that their parents had at their age. Wars continue in Ukraine and the Middle East, and climate change melts the glaciers. Tarkki gave an example: after the attacks of September 11, attendance rose sharply at the church in Solvang where he was serving at the time.

“Religion is the opium of the people,” he said. “The best thing that can happen to the church is catastrophe. In uncertain times, people are looking for safety.”

Tarkki has served the Finnish immigrant community in the United States for almost two decades. His area of responsibility now spans from the Mississippi to the West Coast, as well as Mexico. Although much of the work has shifted to emails and virtual sermons, he still holds a Finnish-language service in Santa Monica about once a month. The service followed a pattern I still knew well, even after all these years: serious hymns that almost none of the 14 attendees sang, an atmosphere both earnest and modest, and a highly structured liturgy. It followed the Evangelical Lutheran form, the only one I had ever really known.

From my childhood, I remember that pastors sometimes seemed like two different people. In front of the congregation during the sermon, they were serious and focused. Outside of worship, they were often the funniest, most foul-mouthed people I knew. Tarkki turned out to be one of those pastors—colorful, bold and with a sharp sense of humor—and I got to know him better after he invited me to his home for a couple of days.

Tarkki lives in Solvang, a small town of about 6,000 people in Santa Barbara County, roughly 120 miles north of Los Angeles. It is also known as “the Danish capital of America.” Driving through town, I saw streets and places named after Danish cities and Nordic mythology: Copenhagen Drive, Aarhus Drive, Roskilde Road, Odin Way, Valhalla Drive and Hamlet Square.

Solvang, which means “sunny field,” was founded in 1911 by three Danish immigrants. Bethania Lutheran Church was built 17 years later and was the first building in town designed to resemble traditional Danish architecture. Residents soon began building their homes in a similar Danish provincial style. Walking through the compact downtown, I passed several windmills, a replica of Copenhagen’s Little Mermaid statue, a Hans Christian Andersen museum and plenty of Danish bakeries selling pastries twice as big and sweet as the ones I know from the Nordics.

A short drive from downtown, Tarkki’s four-bedroom, 3,600-square-foot house sat on a hill overlooking Solvang. Inside, I stepped into a round lobby, where a crystal chandelier hung overhead and a huge monstera plant rose almost to the ceiling, the kind of size it would hardly ever reach in dark, cold Finland. The living room opened wide. An oak-toned grand piano stood to the right, while a fireplace sat on the left. Toward the back, there was a small bar, a practical addition, given that Tarkki’s partner worked in wine. The rooms facing the valley had large windows, and beyond them a terrace ran along the house. There was a swimming pool, sunbeds, a barbecue area and, tucked to the side, a Finnish essential: a small wooden sauna.

Tarkki recalled that he was 6, or maybe 8, when he decided to find out whether God exists. He had been told that God can do anything, so he came up with a simple test. He stretched out his arm and said he wanted an ice cream cone, now. He waited, and waited, but nothing happened. For him, that settled it: there was no God.

“I have probably been an atheist longer than many people,” Tarkki said, laughing. “I often say I’m an unbelievable pastor.” American colleagues sometimes think he’s a bit of an oddball, he added.

Tarkki grew up in the Finnish capital, Helsinki. His parents’ home had bookshelves filled with philosophical works, thanks to his father’s role as a pastor. That is how he learned to argue theology at home. At school, he wrote an essay on the 17th-century philosopher Blaise Pascal’s “Pensées” that impressed his teacher enough to invite him over and ask whether a 14-year-old could really have written it himself.

Tarkki couldn’t stand being a child. People were always telling him what he couldn’t do, or that he was too young to do what he wanted to do. He got bored easily. At school, he was given a 250-page history book to read over the course of nine months, half of it illustrations. He finished it twice in a matter of days. In high school, he completed a full second year in three weeks. After doing that, he signed up with the Seamen’s Union, saying he wanted to go to sea.

Soon, at 17, he was sailing, his first trip taking him from London to Canada. Multiple trips that followed taught him quickly how to step in and help without being asked.

But soon it was time to decide what to do next, and he thought about studying philosophy. His father asked what he would do with the degree. In the theological faculty, he could study

philosophy and still graduate with a profession. He followed his father's advice, even though he never felt a specific calling to become a pastor.

He first came to the United States after he was ordained in the late 1970s and has since lived in Ohio, Seattle, San Francisco, Santa Barbara and Solvang. In the late 1980s, he worked briefly for Microsoft, but spent most of those years in academia, teaching, writing books and doing research at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley and California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks.

In the 1990s, he returned to Helsinki to complete a Ph.D. in philosophical theology. But he ended up multitasking, writing columns for the Finnish tabloid *Iltalehti* on the side. He liked the work, mostly because he had the freedom to write about whatever he wanted, not just religion. When a new liberal political party, the Young Finns, was formed in 1994, Tarkki became its campaign manager. It was a "party for apolitical people," advocating tax cuts and reform of the welfare state while emphasizing education and culture. The party won two seats in Finland's 1995 parliamentary election but none in 1999 and subsequently dissolved. By then, Tarkki had moved on to television, co-hosting "Mars ja Venus," a Finnish talk show about gender roles, relationships and family life with celebrity guests and experts.

Eventually, Tarkki returned to the United States and pastoral work. As the number of sermons he writes has decreased, his work has shifted toward one-on-one conversations. He is responsible for confirmation classes, now often held online, as well as baptisms, weddings and funerals. Sometimes the job brings unexpected requests. Relatives in Finland might call

and ask him to pick up a son from the airport. Once, he was asked to visit a Finnish prisoner in Las Vegas.

Today, his position is officially under the Finnish Seamen's Church, which was originally established to support Finnish seafarers abroad—the same world he entered as a teen—but has since become a gathering place for Finnish migrants in cities around the world. His work includes meeting the parishioners and answering their questions. In Silicon Valley, one Finn asked why praying didn't help.

“I told them there's no point in praying. It's nonsense,” the pastor said.

Instead, he recommended meditation. When he was living next to the Lutheran church where he worked in Solvang, he would often go inside at night. Sometimes around midnight, sometimes in the early morning, after waking up around four.

“It would be completely quiet. No cars, no people, nothing. I'd go in, sit in a pew, and just be still. Sometimes for an hour, just thinking,” he said.

In many cities, planespotting has become a hobby with a global online community. In Solvang, instead of planes, locals track rockets launched from the nearby Vandenberg Space Force Base, carrying satellites into orbit. In the evening, we got in the car and drove closer to

the base. Tarkki wanted to show me what a sonic boom feels like when a rocket is launched into the dark sky.

With our cameras ready, we followed the countdown on our phones when the numbers suddenly stopped at four seconds. Soon it became clear that the launch had been canceled at the last moment because of the weather conditions—too windy. There would be another attempt the next night. Perhaps you should stay one more night so you can see it, the pastor suggested, and I accepted the offer.

On the second morning, the house was silent when I stepped out of the guest room. It had been very different the morning before, when Tarkki blasted “The Internationale,” the famous communist anthem, through the house. “Slaves of work, arise from the night of oppression, the call rings to the edges of the earth,” echoed through the large rooms beneath the stone arches. Apparently, it was his way of signaling that his guest had had enough sleep, delivered with the peculiar sense of humor I was beginning to recognize. On both mornings, Tarkki had been awake and working since four, as usual.

We drove down to town to pick up breakfast pastries, passing a house that once served as a private hideaway for country music legend Dolly Parton and is now affectionately known as “Solvang’s Dollywood.” Above the front door, a stained-glass window still spells out “Dolly,” followed by a small yellow butterfly. Even the yard has its own little windmill. On the way back, we stopped by Bethania Lutheran Church, where Tarkki used to work. What began as a four-month substitution turned into more than 11 years. He grew attached to the

small, slightly whimsical town and eventually settled there. He has now lived there for 25 years.

Inside the church, Trader Joe's paper bags filled with groceries were laid out in the pews, and large boxes blocked the aisle. Like every Monday, volunteers were organizing food aid. Most of them were the same people who had been there when Tarkki was still working at the church, and they greeted him with genuine warmth.

As we drove back to Tarkki's house, he said that what we saw was an example of the good and important work the church can do. "But overall, if I had to weigh it up, I would say religion is more negative than positive," he said. "Especially when you look at fundamentalist evangelicals. They are almost like a distorted version of what religion is supposed to be."

Over the course of our days, the progressive pastor made his views clear: on the current administration and on charismatic megachurch pastors who claim to heal the sick and speak in tongues, leading their congregations into ecstasy with the help of professional bands and arena-sized productions. To him, they are frauds exploiting the vulnerable and fundamentalists who take the Bible literally.

"There isn't a single original manuscript of the New Testament," he said. "What we have are copies of copies, around 5,000 in total, and not one of them is exactly the same. So which of those is the word of God?"

After we returned to his house, we sat down in soft, red, sink-in armchairs facing the valley. When the conversation turned to God and the nature of religion, a more academic side of Tarkki took over. As I mumbled, trying to put my worldview into words, “I think I am an atheist, agnostic, or something similar,” he followed with another question: “What is the God you don’t believe in?”

For me, all the violence, inequality, hunger and disease make it impossible to believe. How would an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God allow them? Tarkki agreed with me: for him, it is a human construction, and there are no reasonable grounds to believe in any supernatural deity. Although he had repeated his non-believing tendencies many times, he moved on to a more sophisticated version of what God could be.

“If you ask me what my concept of God would be, I think God is more like a kind of potential for everything that could happen in the future,” he said. “The process of creation is happening all the time. So I would say this: for me, God is an enduring possibility of being.”

He preferred to explain religion through the concepts of non-religiousness, the universe and infinity, rather than the more common, and perhaps somewhat simplistic, belief in God.

“Even the acceptance that there is no hope for an afterlife, for me, is a religion. I believe that everything is finite. And if you now ask me, under this definition, whether I am religious, I would say, of course,” he said.

Darkness was falling over Solvang as the second attempt to launch a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket carrying Starlink satellites approached. The last light of the sun still lingered behind the mountains. This time, we stayed on the terrace. There would be no rumble, no sonic boom—but the view would be better. The countdown reached zero.

A bright orange light rose from behind the ridge, slowly climbing into the sky. It took a moment before a white plume formed behind it. Then the rocket arced forward, moving horizontally across the valley in front of us, until it seemed to sink into a round cloud of its own making.

In that moment, watching it begin its journey into low-Earth orbit, it felt easy to believe in infinity. Within minutes, it was gone. I hadn't expected it to be so quiet, so meditative and so beautiful—the whole moment felt like a movie scene. It left behind a spreading pattern of white, blue and red that looked like a piece of art.

It hung there above the small Danish town for a while, in the same sky that, in my own language, is also heaven.

Chapter Three: Christianity, in Theory

Some of my friends back in Finland raised their eyebrows when I told them I had started visiting Californian churches out of curiosity. For me, it was something of a shortcut to making sense of American culture and politics. “Be careful, or they’ll get you,” more than one warned, half-joking.

Looking back, it wasn’t only my friends who were skeptical. It was also my inner voice, reflecting a chronic suspicion toward anything tied to organized religion. Especially in the United States, Christianity is accompanied by a great deal of political and cultural baggage. In Finland, religion is private. Faith is rarely discussed, not with friends, not with family, not in public. There is no distinct religion beat in journalism, and with one dominant denomination, the church has not been considered particularly dynamic or newsworthy.

At the end of 2025, [about 61 percent of Finns belonged](#) to the Evangelical Lutheran Church, roughly 3.5 million people out of a population of 5.7 million. The Finnish Orthodox Church, the country’s other state church, [had just over 55,000 members in 2025](#).

To Americans, the idea of a state church may sound odd in what is supposedly a secular country. Yet in Finland, the Evangelical Lutheran and Orthodox churches hold a legally defined public status. Religion is a mandatory subject in schools, with students either studying their own faith or a secular alternative focused on ethics, philosophy and social

values. Church members are also listed in a registry and pay an income-based church tax, typically between 1 and 2.25 percent, collected alongside state and municipal taxes. For a middle-class member, those payments amount to about \$370 annually.

Meanwhile, in the United States, [62 percent of the population](#) identified as Christian in 2025. Beyond the similar share of Christians in Finland, the two countries have something else in common. First, both have seen a rapid rise in the number of religiously unaffiliated people, often referred to as “nones,” including atheists and agnostics. In the United States, the share of religiously unaffiliated adults grew from 5 percent in the early 1970s to 28 percent in 2022, according to the General Social Survey. The number of nones roughly doubled between 2004 and 2021. In “The Vanishing Church,” Ryan P. Burge, a quantitative scholar of American religion, argues that the rise of the nones is the most significant change in American society over the past three decades.

Second, both in Finland and the United States, the long-term decline of Christianity appears to have slowed in recent years. Fewer people are leaving, and some churches are once again seeing growth.

Despite similar numbers on paper, religion is a much more visible force in American society than it is in Finland. Once I started paying attention to it—and perhaps looking for it—it seemed to be everywhere. People talk about faith more openly, thank God for their blessings and actually go to church. In Finland, it is common to identify as Christian while attending church only at Christmas, if even then. Christianity often functions more as a cultural inheritance than a guiding force in everyday life, and the Bible is generally not interpreted literally.

Finnish religiosity mostly resembles the kind of Christianity that is now shrinking across the United States. Not long ago, roughly half of Americans belonged to moderate mainline Protestant denominations that occupied the middle ground of the religious landscape. They were neither especially conservative nor especially liberal, did not interpret the Bible literally, and generally left room for doubt. These denominations include churches such as the American Baptists, the United Methodists, the Episcopalians, the United Church of Christ and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. According to Ryan P. Burge, these non-evangelical churches are now heading for extinction, as religious polarization accelerates.

“By driving out the moderates from American religion, we have created a divide in which a whole bunch of people on each side are convinced that those on the other side are immoral or bigots,” Burge writes.

Churches once served as places where Republicans and Democrats could sit shoulder to shoulder in the same pews and continue their conversations afterward. Increasingly, congregations have split along the same political lines that divide the rest of the country.

Reading the news from Europe, it can seem as if most American Christians are MAGA evangelicals mostly interested in abortion and guns. In reality, they attract outsized attention because of their political influence and visibility. That can distort the broader picture of American Christianity, especially for Europeans accustomed to less religious diversity.

What is often overlooked is that many churches have also played a prominent role in social justice movements, from the abolition of slavery to the civil rights movement. More recently, churches have been among those helping immigrant communities during the ICE raids that

began in the summer of 2025. Some congregations, for example, have organized volunteer networks to warn residents when immigration agents enter a neighborhood.

The problem, I realized, was that I had been thinking about American Christianity too simply, not fully appreciating how much diversity it contains. I had also assumed California would offer a more secular version of America, even though pockets of conservatism could be found in the most surprising places.

The only way to understand that was to start sitting in the pews with American congregants.

Chapter Four: Sunday Morning in America

As I pulled into the parking lot of an industrial-looking hall in Riverside, I saw a herd of donkeys trotting down the hillside beside it, braying on their way. It felt more like arriving at a festival than a church service. Volunteers in orange vests directed traffic and pointed vehicles toward open spaces. Nowhere else in California is it so easy to find free parking as at a church.

When I attended my first megachurch service at Sandals Church, I could not stop looking at the pipes, cables and lights crisscrossing the ceiling of the colossal worship hall. It resembled a concert arena far more than a sacred space. How, I wondered, was I supposed to feel any sense of holiness in a place that seemed so dark, utilitarian and uninspiring?

I also immediately regretted forgetting my earplugs. When the worship band began playing, the volume was overwhelming. A large crowd sang along while lyrics flashed across massive screens, creating the feeling of a stadium sing-along. The congregation was predominantly white and middle-aged, with a substantial number of Latino worshippers and some Asian attendees. Compared with some of the Los Angeles churches I would later visit, there was little effort to dress up for worship. Plaid shirts, hoodies, T-shirts and jeans were common.

I had chosen Sandals, a non-denominational evangelical megachurch, partly because social media had already introduced me to its founder, Pastor Matt Brown. On Instagram, he posted videos about marriage, parenting and everyday struggles with the timing and delivery of a

stand-up comedian. He joked, laughed, occasionally raised his voice and peppered his audience with questions.

Wearing cargo pants, an oversized black T-shirt and a denim jacket, Brown spoke about suffering, personal growth and flourishing marriages. He talked about why children should experience difficulty, what makes a good leader and how love is tested in hardship rather than comfort. The Bible appeared only briefly, and faith hardly at all. I left feeling as though I had attended a life-coaching seminar or a motivational TED Talk. Those who wanted more could continue listening through Brown's podcast. Donations, meanwhile, were encouraged through the church's app.

At Cornerstone, a non-denominational church in Sawtelle, West Los Angeles, I was surprised by how young the congregation was. At the English-language service on a Sunday morning, most attendees appeared to be Gen Z. I struggled to spot anyone with gray hair.

Midway through the service, a church member gave a presentation about a local women's health clinic, describing services related to parenting, adoption and abortion while also sharing pregnancy statistics. I seemed to be the only person in the room wondering whether this was the right place and time for what felt like a commercial break, promoting an alternative to Planned Parenthood.

The church takes pride in offering services in three languages: English, Spanish and Farsi. Its Iranian-born pastor, Ara Torosian, told me that most of his congregants are Iranian asylum

seekers. He had voted for Donald Trump three times, believing he would be the toughest on the Iranian regime. But he said he would not do so again, worried that American leaders were increasingly mixing faith and politics. He had fled Iran for precisely that reason.

“I hate it. America should not be a Christian nation. America is beautiful because of its diversity. When any religion tries to dominate the culture, even Christianity, it destroys that beauty,” Torosian said.

ICE had targeted some of his congregants, and he had visited detention centers and immigration courts to testify on their behalf about their Christian faith. A few weeks after we spoke, the United States launched strikes against Iran, which was exactly the kind of confrontation Torosian had long hoped for.

After Farsi, I heard Finnish. At St. Paul’s Lutheran Church in Santa Monica, I heard the Lord’s Prayer in my native language for the first time in years. The words seemed almost swallowed by the vast stone church, where only a dozen or so other people sat scattered across the pews beneath the soaring vaults.

By the second megachurch, I had learned to expect coffee before communion. At Mariners Church, a wealthy non-denominational evangelical megachurch in Irvine, I finally rewarded myself with a coffee for making it to Orange County by 8:30 a.m. on a Sunday after two weeks without caffeine. The campus was stunning, with fountains and reflecting pools scattered between the buildings.

As the worship band played a deafeningly loud song about trusting that “the Lord will provide,” a dry voice in my head told me that I knew the welfare state would provide. Free education, affordable healthcare and social security are basic rights for Finns, not luxuries. The absence of those safety nets may help explain why so many Americans turn to religion, not only for spiritual comfort but also for practical support and community.

After the service, worshippers browsed the church bookstore, shopping for kitchen towels, summer dresses and jewelry decorated with crosses, American flags and words like “grateful” and “blessed.” There were actual books, too, offering guidance for Christians on everything from technology to LGBTQ issues and gender identity. An entire shelf was devoted to C.S. Lewis, author of the Christian-themed “Chronicles of Narnia.”

At First Christian Church of North Hollywood, a Disciples of Christ congregation in Studio City, just over the hill from Hollywood, I met Rev. Jonathan Hall. He learned firsthand how divisive the topic of Christian nationalism had become after announcing a screening of “Bad Faith,” a documentary about the erosion of the separation between church and state.

“It shouldn’t be Muslims speaking up against Christian nationalism. It shouldn’t be Jewish people speaking up against it,” Hall said. “This is a Christian problem.” The screening was ultimately canceled after some conservative members of the congregation objected.

When I attended his Sunday service, a white rose had been placed on the altar in memory of Alex Pretti, a 37-year-old nurse from Minneapolis who had been fatally shot by federal

immigration agents. Freddie, a longtime congregant who has attended the church since the 1950s, told me the last time the congregation felt this divided was during the Vietnam War.

At Mosaic Church, a non-denominational Christian enclave that had a satellite campus in South Pasadena for young creatives, many attendees looked like regulars at Silver Lake thrift stores, wine bars and coffee shops. There were mustaches, cowboy boots, loose jeans, leather jackets and fingers stacked with rings. The fonts and aesthetics of the advertisement boards outside made it clear that millennials and Gen Z were the target audience.

Mosaic met in the historic Rialto Theatre, which has appeared in films such as “La La Land” and “Scream 2.” Inside, first- and second-time visitors were asked to raise their hands. Everyone was then instructed to turn to the person next to them and say, “You’re going to have the best day ever.” From my balcony seat, I looked down at people in the front rows dancing with the worship band, their hands raised.

Salvadoran American pastor Erwin McManus briefly referenced the political climate, mentioning that “we have a lot going on in our country” and urging the congregation not to “politicize human tragedy.” After the service, however, he declined to speak with me and directed me to the church’s communications manager. Later, I browsed his website, where he is described as a “life architect” and artist and, if you look carefully enough, a pastor too. Much of it was devoted to his books, coaching services and speaking events.

At Saddleback Church, a non-denominational evangelical megachurch in Lake Forest and one of the largest churches in California, I got lost in the parking lots before I even made it inside. To find the correct building for the service, I had to navigate the campus with the help of map boards. Inside, the worship hall was filled with plastic chairs, a surprisingly unsacred choice for a church. As a first-time visitor, I was handed a \$6 Starbucks gift card. A few minutes later, a woman approached me while we were washing our hands in the restroom. She enthusiastically praised the pastors and asked whether it was my first visit. Before long, I was invited to lunch. I politely declined, feeling uncomfortably observed throughout my visit.

Back in Los Angeles, at Bel Air Church, the Presbyterian congregation where Ronald and Nancy Reagan worshipped, I noticed more checks being slipped into the offering plates than anywhere else I visited. Whether that reflected a wealthier congregation or simply the absence of QR codes for mobile donations, I could not tell. Sitting in the pews, I remembered the saying that Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America. Church after church, it was becoming difficult to disagree.

After the service, I spoke with two longtime congregants, John Isaacs and Peter Reglia, who remembered the Sundays when the Reagans attended. They recalled Secret Service agents quietly securing the church before each visit.

“There’s a vent. Nancy Reagan didn’t like the draft on her head, so they put up a little cover. That’s the Reagan vent cover right up there,” Reglia said.

Donald Trump was baptized and confirmed in the Presbyterian Church but now identifies as a non-denominational Christian. I asked Isaacs and Reglia what they thought of the president's faith. Reglia laughed and recalled Trump's reference to "Two Corinthians" instead of "Second Corinthians" during a speech at Liberty University in 2016.

"Nobody says 'Two Corinthians' here," Reglia said. "I don't think he spent much time in church. Yeah, I'm certain."

If there was a single American Christianity, my Sunday explorations never brought me any closer to defining it. Perhaps there had never been one to find.

Chapter Five: In Search of the Sacred

Only when I was sitting in a pew at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels did I realize I had never been in such a modern Catholic church. When I lived in Mexico, I visited my fair share of cathedrals, and they were centuries old, their walls carrying the weight of time, as if they could tell their stories if you listened closely enough. Buildings like that once took generations to complete. This one, just north of downtown Los Angeles, was finished in 2002, after only three years of construction.

Unlike most new churches, this cathedral felt sacred to me, despite its modern architecture. Perhaps it was the sheer size of the space, the stone walls, the organ, the wooden pews, the cross at the altar, or simply how cool and restful it felt inside.

I arrived at a special Mass for peace, organized amid violence linked to immigration raids. Los Angeles Archbishop José H. Gomez leads the nation's largest Catholic community. Born in Mexico, he has long advocated for immigrant rights, but at the beginning of 2026 he and the Archdiocese [faced criticism](#) for not speaking out more visibly in support of their community. Against that backdrop, the issue was addressed at the February Mass. Gomez framed the moment as a test of America's original promise.

“America’s founders dreamed that this would be a land where men and women from every race and faith, from every national background, could live with dignity,” he said. “Let’s keep close to our immigrant brothers and sisters. Let them know that nothing can ever separate them from the love of God.”

I was curious about how clergy take on an active role in politically charged issues like ICE raids, especially after seeing the sanctuary movement reemerge in the summer of 2025. Attending felt like a necessary expression of support, particularly in Los Angeles County, where 83 percent of parishes offer Mass in Spanish.

I am far from fluent in Catholicism, but something about the Mass has always felt comforting, almost nourishing to the senses. Perhaps it is the structured way of following the liturgy, which reminds me of the Lutheran church. So when Easter approached and national newspapers began reporting record numbers of new Catholic converts across the United States, particularly among young people, it caught my attention. For example, the Archdiocese of Los Angeles welcomed more than [8,500 new Catholics](#) at Easter 2026, a roughly 54 percent increase from the previous year.

One of those converts was Levi Hammock, a 35-year-old tech professional. For him, baptism felt like becoming new. “All your sins are wiped away. That’s an incredible feeling,” he said a couple of weeks later.

He had been preparing for that moment for a long time, taking classes for a year through the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults (OCIA), the church’s process for initiating adult converts. The program included following the liturgical calendar, fasting and reflection. Eventually, Holy Week arrived, culminating in the Easter Vigil, when Hammock and other newcomers were baptized and welcomed into the Church. Afterward, he received the Eucharist for the first time.

[Pew data](#) shows that about 20 percent of U.S. adults identify as Catholic, roughly 53 million people. Despite the recent increase in conversions, the church has been shrinking over the long term. Now, it seems, the reasons young adults engage with religion are changing, said Richard Wood, president of the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at the University of Southern California.

“What is very well documented is the old pattern whereby young adults in America largely left religion in their late teens and early 20s, and then consistently came back as they moved toward marriage and having kids,” Wood said. “That is just not happening.”

Part of the shift, Wood said, is demographic. Fewer young people are getting married or having children. But even for those who do, those milestones no longer lead them back to organized religion. “It is other factors that are driving people back toward religion,” Wood said.

Father Juan Ochoa, director of the Office for Divine Worship for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, told the [National Catholic Register](#) that the U.S. is seeing “a decrease in cultural Catholicism and an increase in people becoming Catholics by personal choice.”

Hammock had always considered himself spiritual and was raised Protestant. A few years ago, he decided to take religion more seriously and began exploring. He went to a couple of

churches, but the non-denominational style of worship—with joking, pep talks and rock music—did not impress him.

“I wanted something more reverent,” Hammock said. “In the Catholic Church, I found holiness and a faith rooted in tradition and intellectual depth.” He eventually joined an OCIA program at St. Mark Catholic Church in Venice.

He also found old cathedrals beautiful in a way that supports spiritual practice, unlike some new churches built in warehouse-like buildings. The teachings had a consistency rooted in antiquity, which he didn’t see in other denominations, where he heard quite different messages from one service to another.

Wood also pointed to the role of beauty in Catholicism, from its architecture and iconography to its centuries-old rituals. That kind of depth offers a contrast to what doom-scrolled brains are constantly consuming online. “Catholicism is such a deep tradition, with 2,000 years of spirituality, intellectual work, art and music. I think that may drive some of the attraction,” Wood said.

I think of all the gorgeous Catholic frescoes in Europe, most of all Michelangelo’s “The Last Judgment” in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, stretching across the wall in a vast single scene. And I understand. I, too, have grown tired of the shallowness of contemporary aesthetics: the sterile minimalism and social media ecosystem saturated with passing fashions

and beauty standards. Against that backdrop, it is not surprising that Catholic aesthetics feel appealing: the density of meaning in its iconography, the candlelit altars, veils, the rosaries. My mind turns to selfie museums, spaces built for people to take photos of themselves with props for social media. What would Michelangelo—or any artist from past centuries—make of calling these places museums?

In fact, Catholicism isn't the only Christian tradition benefiting from Gen Z's hunger for history and beauty. In recent years, media reports have noted a [rise in conversions](#) to Orthodox Christianity as well, another tradition rooted in ritual and continuity. The split between the Roman Catholic Church in the West and the Eastern Orthodox Church dates back to 1054, but they still share an emphasis on worship that engages all the senses.

Brian Handy, a 36-year-old game designer who was raised Catholic, has seen the growing interest firsthand. An active member of St. Monica Catholic Church in Santa Monica, he is involved in young adult communities across Los Angeles and has noticed more young people showing up—both lifelong Catholics and newcomers.

“Hookup culture and modern life can feel empty,” Handy said. “Something is pushing people to look for meaning, something deeper. It could be loneliness, social media or politics.”

Wood also said multiple factors are driving people to search for something beyond the secular world. Political turbulence has unsettled American life over the last 10 years, and job

prospects are uncertain for young people. Some may simply be fed up with the brain rot and isolation caused by the pandemic and social media.

“I think young people feel a sense of what is wrong with the world. A world driven by huge egos, the nastiness in our politics, the immediate pursuit of consumerism or sexuality, and a sort of unhinged mode. Those wear thin really fast,” Wood said.

Handy also emphasized the importance of physical, in-person practices. “So much of Catholicism is physical. You can’t replace it with something online,” he said. For young people tired of swiping on dating apps, church communities may also feel like a good place to meet a potential partner who shares their values.

Meanwhile, social media has been helping spread the word, as the Catholic Church and religious influencers have gained more visibility. Hallow, the Catholic prayer and meditation app, allows users to adjust their prayers to the time they have available. The podcast by two Catholic sisters in Michigan, “Dominican Sisters Open Mic,” has gone viral on TikTok. [In one video](#), one sister talks about how she loves playing ultimate frisbee, and Sister Miriam replies, “Sister, and you are so good at that!” The response and the overall presence of these women have become a much-needed embodiment of genuine kindness. For once, I agreed with the internet: they are calm, gentle and unguarded, and I loved that.

In some places, immigration under the Biden administration may have increased the number of Catholics. The impact of the new pope most likely will not yet appear in the conversion numbers of 2026. But some experts predict that the first pope from the United States, Leo XIV, who speaks with a native Chicago accent, could raise interest among non-Catholic Americans. Cultural visibility may also play a role. For example, Spanish pop singer Rosalía launched an [unapologetically religious album](#), “Lux,” inspired by female saints. The album, with its lavish [nuncore aesthetic](#), includes references to rosaries and relics, as well as reflections on the divine and God. On the album cover, she wears a white headpiece resembling a nun’s habit, and in the music video for “Berghain,” she removes a pair of iconic rosary heels by Alexander McQueen.

Still, those within the church say the appeal runs deeper than visibility, celebrities or trends. “We have a spiritual longing,” Hammock said. “And secular modernity has failed to answer those questions.”

After his conversion, Hammock’s night ended with a shared In-N-Out meal at 11 p.m. Parishioners, both new and old, were hungry after a three-hour Mass. Sitting over burgers and fries was another way to embrace the community, and it was something that couldn’t be replicated online.

Later, I watched short videos on Instagram, where young women explained what being a “cool Catholic” meant to them and read about how [Gen Z in New York](#) gathered for events like Pizza to Pews and Holy Girl Walks. I did that scrolling alone, on my phone.

Chapter Six: A Small-Town Pastor in the Algorithm Age

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Ozark, Alabama, is sometimes referred to as a “sombrero,” thanks to its shape and pointed roof, which, admittedly, resembles the iconic Mexican headwear. Its round form has also earned it another nickname: “Pizza Hut.” According to a bit of local lore, the lack of corners means the devil has nowhere to hide.

What’s with the devil here in Alabama, I thought when the pastor told me the story. On my three-hour drive from Birmingham to Ozark, I passed an enormous sign declaring, “Go to church or the devil will get you,” and later saw T-shirts printed with the same message.

As I stepped out of my car, the Rev. Chad Ingle greeted me in the parking lot beside the church. He was in his early 50s, tall but not lanky, with light hair cut short and a beard starting to gray. Thin-framed glasses rested on his nose. I was not sure whether it was a coincidence, or whether he remembered from our phone calls that Finns drink the most coffee in the world, but before anything else, he asked if I would like some.

I had not expected Lutheranism in the United States to take so many different forms. It was the Finnish pastor in Solvang who first mentioned the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), which does not ordain women as pastors or recognize LGBTQ rights. In Finland, the Evangelical Lutheran Church has had—and still has—its own debates over marriage equality, but the idea of not allowing women to serve as pastors felt to me like something from another era. I soon found myself going down a rabbit hole online, only to discover that, despite its relatively small size, Ingle’s church had more than once been associated with figures linked to far-right groups and controversial views.

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church made local headlines when the Alabama Political Reporter [wrote about gatherings](#) of the “Southern Christian Protectors” in the congregation's fellowship hall. The paper described it as a neo-Confederate group, citing the Southern Poverty Law Center, a characterization the group itself disputes. It usually meets at the Southern Cultural Center in Wetumpka, about a hundred miles north of Ozark. In Finland, hosting a group like that would likely put the church in the national spotlight. Not here.

Ozark sits in the heart of the Bible Belt in southern Alabama. Its economic engine is Fort Rucker, a military base that trains helicopter pilots. Once named the “most patriotic city in Alabama,” it is deeply conservative, with about 80 percent of voters backing Trump in the latest election. The town has a little more than 14,000 residents and around 50 churches. Prince of Peace is the only Lutheran one, and it belongs to the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod.

The church has a small, aging congregation; about 40 or 50 people typically attend Sunday services. Like many churches in the area, a large share of its parishioners are connected to the military, either as soldiers or as “war brides,” German women who came to the United States with American soldiers stationed abroad.

It is not the most exciting place for a curious and talkative man like Ingle, which may explain why he seemed delighted by my visit. Over the days we spent together, he turned out to be as curious about my Finnish background as I was about him, asking questions about Finnish history, politics and culture. What I began to notice, too, was how tight-knit the community in Ozark is, and how Ingle’s own community extends beyond it, existing online.

Ingle was raised Southern Baptist but decided to join the Lutheran Church when he was 29. He was ordained 10 years later. He defines himself as a supporter of traditional Christian values and a paleoconservative, favoring a more isolationist foreign policy over constant U.S. involvement abroad. That's why he wouldn't vote for Donald Trump again. The U.S. attack on Iran was a breaking point for him.

Ingle's sentences were filled with phrases like "that's just how it is," "it's natural," and "everybody knows." He name-dropped researchers, historians and YouTube figures he follows. One of the most visible figures associated with his worldview is Tucker Carlson, the former Fox News host who now runs his own online show after being fired in 2023. A former Trump supporter, Carlson has begun portraying the president as evil, at times intimating he might be the antichrist without saying the word himself. "I follow Tucker Carlson pretty closely," Ingle said.

Alongside Carlson, he mentioned figures such as professor and conservative commentator Jordan Peterson and Idaho pastor Doug Wilson, who Ingle thought was "a very smart man and a good theologian," though he disagrees with him on Israel. [Wilson has drawn attention](#) for arguing that voting should belong to men as heads of households. His views have reached a wider audience in part because one of the most prominent members of his congregation is Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth. In 2025, Wilson's [Christ Church opened](#) a new congregation in Washington, D.C.

Some of the people Ingle follows online have become, in a sense, part of his social circle.

Others he discovered through YouTube's recommendation algorithm, where one video leads to another.

One of his favorite topics was Israel and its influence on American decision-making. Ingle used to support Israel, but not anymore. Not after he started to "ask deeper questions," study the issue and look into what he says "most people just don't know."

He was convinced that Jewish groups, such as the lobbying organization AIPAC, hold significant wealth and influence behind the scenes in American foreign policy, an idea that flirts with antisemitic conspiracy narratives about Jewish domination. This interest took him to the Eradicate Hate Global Summit in Pittsburgh, founded after the 2018 synagogue massacre. "It was very interesting to hear what they think and how paranoid they are," Ingle said. "It's like it's always around the corner—that Jewish people are going to be attacked."

According to an Anti-Defamation League [report](#), an average of 17 antisemitic incidents per day were reported in the United States in 2025, while physical assaults reached a record high, rising from 196 in 2024 to 203 in 2025. However, the organization broadened its definition of antisemitic incidents after Hamas' attack on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023. The ADL now includes "certain expressions of opposition to Zionism," while saying it does not include "general criticism of Israel, anti-Israel activism or support for Palestinian rights."

In 2024 and 2025, Ingle traveled to Tennessee to attend the American Renaissance conference, which the Southern Poverty Law Center describes as a white nationalist event

where “racist intellectuals rub shoulders with Klansmen, neo-Nazis and other white supremacists.”

“It was mostly intellectual discussions with writers and professors, people talking about ideas like free association and cultural identity,” Ingle said. He said he would not attend again—not because he doesn’t want to, but because he promised church leadership he wouldn’t. He made the same promise about the Southern Christian Protectors, even though he said he was not the one who allowed them to meet in the church in the first place.

The small group, consisting mostly of older white men, holds monthly events and has hosted speakers such as Eric Orwoll, co-founder of the Return to the Land project, a whites-only community initiative in Arkansas. “I still know some of them, and they are still friends, but I have to do what the church body says. They said it does not look the way we want it to look, so we don’t do it,” Ingle said.

When I spoke with Jeff Tischauer, a research analyst at the Southern Poverty Law Center, and asked about the group’s significance, he said its size does not make it harmless. “They amplify rhetoric, provide a meeting place, and bring people together physically,” he said. “That allows networking and the sharing of ideas.”

He added that such spaces can have broader effects. “They contribute to a culture where violence is seen as inevitable. Even if members themselves don’t act, they can influence individuals who do.”

When I was in Alabama, the SCC was supposed to hold a jamboree in Wetumpka. Its leadership denied me access, saying that media attention had never done them any good. I drove past the building on a Saturday night anyway, curious to see how many people would show up. The building was dark and empty. The event had been canceled because of illness and injury among the organizers.

“You’re getting all of it from the Southern Poverty Law Center, right?” Ingle asked as we sat outside the church and I challenged some of his views. “They are radical leftists.”

He believed the SPLC hunted for obscure groups and turned them into something bigger. Their agenda, he said, is to make “a mountain out of a molehill.” Technically, that is part of its task: the organization, based in Montgomery, Alabama, has spent more than 50 years tracking hate groups and domestic extremist activity, including the Ku Klux Klan.

Distrust of the SPLC surfaced elsewhere, too, often without prompting. On a Sunday, I visited a gun show at the Civic Center. The hall was lined with stalls selling shotguns, ammunition, holsters and survival gear, alongside hand sanitizer labeled “liberal tears” and something called “lethal leggings.”

I struck up a conversation with a man from the nearby city of Enterprise. When I later mentioned that I was in Ozark writing about Ingle and asked if he knew him, he shook his head.

“No, I’ve never heard that name before. Wait—do you work for the Southern Poverty Law Center or something?” he asked, even though I had not mentioned the organization.

A few weeks after my trip to Alabama, the [Justice Department charged](#) the SPLC with a number of financial crimes, including wire fraud and conspiracy to commit money laundering. According to the indictment, the organization paid informants to infiltrate extremist groups. The indictment accused it of “manufacturing racism to justify its existence.” In recent years, the center has also become a political adversary for Republicans after raising [concerns](#) about groups such as Turning Point USA and Moms for Liberty. The SPLC has said the charges are an example of the politicization of the Justice Department under Donald Trump.

Driving from Ozark back to Birmingham, I kept thinking about how political and polarized everything suddenly felt. What surprised me was not only the strength of people’s views, but how difficult it seemed to separate religion, politics, history and identity from one another. In Finland, organizations tend to stay more narrowly within their lane. Here, churches, civic groups and cultural organizations often appeared to exist in the same ideological ecosystem. Opinions were plastered on highway billboards and bumper stickers, and complete strangers made sure I knew they considered USC a “woke university.” I was not sure whether that was Alabama, the South, religion, or simply my own heightened attention to things that felt different from California.

For me, the most startling was the Lutheran faith I encountered in Ozark. In theory, the hymns and teachings seemed familiar at first. During a midweek service, Ingle stood in a

black suit at the front of the sanctuary, moving through psalms, prayers and readings precisely. Parishioners followed along from the wooden pews, rising and sitting at the right moments without instruction. But in conversations with both Ingle and his congregants, I realized we were looking at Lutheran teachings through very different lenses.

I have very little sympathy for anything that excuses violence, or for people unwilling to condemn it outright. When Donald Trump responded to the violence in Charlottesville by saying there were “good people on both sides,” the comment resonated with Ingle, despite the presence of neo-Nazis, Ku Klux Klan members and other white supremacists at the rally, which ended with the death of a woman.

“I don’t think most people in those situations are inherently bad,” Ingle told me. “I think most people believe they’re acting in good faith.”

I struggle to see good faith in people carrying torches, weapons and flags with Nazi or Confederate insignia to a rally.

I also asked Ingle whether he would allow Southern Christian Protectors to meet in the church again if leadership approved it.

“Of course,” he replied. “They are very good people, very fine people.”

Ingle does not see himself as controversial. He sees himself as informed, someone who listens to “both sides.” And in Ozark, Alabama, that way of seeing the world does not stand out as unusual.

Chapter Seven: A Sound Sanctuary for the Spiritually Curious

What would this feel like if I had taken mushrooms before walking into the chapel? The thought crossed my mind as I lay on a yoga mat on the cold stone floor.

Pink, green, blue and purple lights danced across the dome ceiling, the stone pillars and walls. Soft organ music played in the background as people continued to enter and settle into their spots. The small points of light above me made me think of the universe and the stars, while the organ, interrupted occasionally by the sound of church bells, added a touch of drama.

The thought probably came from a [radio program](#) I had listened to a few days earlier about the world's largest psychedelic mushroom church in Oakland. That had sent me down another rabbit hole, this time into studies exploring how psychedelics are used in the search for God, the divine and other transcendent experiences. I became particularly fascinated by a [study of Muslim women](#) who described a deepened connection to the Quran while using psychedelics.

After months spent in churches, Masses and conversations about God, I had ended up here: the First Congregational Church of Los Angeles, the oldest Protestant church in the city. But the journey I was about to begin had nothing to do with substances because I was there for a sound bath. The only tools involved would be instruments and the sounds they produced.

At first, the event felt like a cosmic slumber party at Hogwarts. Except that to my left, Jesus the Good Shepherd watched from a stained-glass window, a lamb resting in his lap.

Adrienne Bawa, a slender redhead, was doing final preparations in the front, moving softly in her green silk dress and floral silk robe. In front of the cross, she had created an alternative altar of gongs, candles, bowls and flowers.

Bawa, a founder of Sound Bird Healing, has been organizing monthly sound baths in the church for four years. She was inspired by the architecture, which was designed for music and the spoken word, but also by the building's sense of sacredness and the way the space carries the energy of communal gatherings. She said participants had had many spiritual experiences during her sound baths.

“I call them altered states of consciousness or deep meditation,” Bawa said. “People use this as a spiritual practice to get closer to themselves or their higher power. Some people even bring things to the altar and use it almost like a ceremony.”

Bawa practices Sikhism with Buddhist influences, though she describes herself as spiritual rather than religious. Perhaps that is why she is careful about how she frames sound baths in a Christian church and the language she uses during them. She has also met many people with religious trauma who are wary of church settings. For them, attending a sound bath has often been their first positive church experience in a long time. Bawa also avoids talking about healing or using mantras because, in a place of worship, those concepts may not always be well received. For new audiences, she describes the experience as a meditation concert.

The First Congregational Church of Los Angeles proved a natural fit because of its emphasis on music and the arts. But while searching for a venue and community partner, Bawa realized how many assumptions people had about sound baths. “There's this notion that it's pagan or

demonic, including energy healing attached to spells,” she said. A couple of churches, most of them Catholic, declined her proposal because they felt pairing churches and sound baths was too dissonant.

I was already fully relaxed when the sound bath began, resting my head on a pillow and covering myself with a wool scarf. Following others' example, I put on an eye mask and added my own Finnish essential, wool socks, to stay warm and comfortable from head to toe.

Then the air of the neo-Gothic chapel filled with beautiful whooshes and swishes. It wasn't only Bawa but a handful of instrumentalists creating soft, layered sounds and vibrations that carried everyone present on a sonic journey. They moved slowly among the people lying on the floor, occasionally bringing instruments above our bodies or faces. Before the sound bath began, we were encouraged to stay curious. Some sounds, we were told, might feel unfamiliar or even uncomfortable, but they were all intentional. I found them all beautiful.

Before long, I stopped trying to identify the instruments. The only ones I recognized were rain sticks and crystal singing bowls. Instead, I let the sounds carry me elsewhere: to forests where leaves rustled in the wind, to the edge of the sea, beside a burbling creek, and into another galaxy filled with the sounds of emptiness and infinity. At some point, I lost awareness of the outlines of my body. I slipped into a power-saving mode: my pulse slowed, and my mind became blissfully empty.

“Throughout the ages, pantheists have sometimes imagined God as a mystical form of energy, a cosmic force, consciousness, all of nature, or the universe itself,” writes Kathryn A. Johnson in her book “Imagining God.”

I didn't feel the presence of God, but I experienced awe, beauty and connection, both to myself and to the strangers around me, in a way I felt I had been missing. I had felt something similar before: on dance floors crowded with hundreds of people when electronic music seemed to run through everyone's veins; on mountaintops overlooking endless horizons; on coastlines watching waves crash; and beneath the sky as a rocket pierced it above Solvang. How extraordinary art, nature, science and space can be! In the chapel, I was deeply inside my body while also feeling as though I were observing the scene from somewhere high above.

Everyone can choose their own adventure in a sound bath. It can be approached purely as relaxation, as meditation, as a spiritual exercise or even as a religious one, depending on a person's beliefs. That flexibility may explain why practices like this have found a place in California's religious landscape.

I also believe everyone can choose their own adventure when it comes to religion, and that path can be full of curves and surprising detours. Our relationship with religion may be as fluid as our views on politics, sexuality or relationships, evolving as we age. To me, a sound bath in a church represented something distinctly Californian. It was an open invitation to practice wellness, spirituality or even religion, on an individual level that fits each person's needs. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that "for the Americans the ideas of Christianity and liberty are so completely mingled that it is almost impossible to get them to conceive of the one without the other." Today, I am not sure whether this holds in everyday American life, but in the chapel I could see traces of what he meant.

Most often, though, the greatest benefit of religion is the community it provides, especially in a hyper-individualistic society. Perhaps that helps explain the popularity of book clubs and running clubs that have flourished in cities across Europe and the United States. People are looking for one another.

But while I agree with the feminists of the 1970s that the personal can be political when it comes to bodily autonomy, finances or work, my time in the United States led me to a different conclusion about religion. Faith may shape private lives in profound ways, but it is healthiest when kept separate from politics.

That does not mean religion should be hidden or that conversations about God, the afterlife or the divine should be off limits. I may not want someone telling me how to live based on a 2,000-year-old book. But I am happy to tell you how I felt lying on a cold church floor listening to rain sticks if you are willing to tell me what gives your life meaning and whether there is anything larger than yourself that you believe in.

Somewhere along the way, I developed a soft spot, even a kind of hunger, for conversations about spirituality and purpose. Simply allowing religion into my life as a topic of conversation opened the door to discussions about the sacred, morality and God. Even if I do not believe, I am still curious about why others do. I can feel myself leaning toward something, even if I am not sure what to call it.

So please, don't tell me about your new gym routine or your annoying boss. Tell me what it means for you to live a good life.

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