

Searching, not Leaving: Exclusion, Belonging, and Becoming in Religious Communities

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For the first time in recorded history, religious membership in the United States has dropped below 50%. Earlier this year, in March 2021, Gallop released this finding in its most recent poll, which tracks the number of U.S. adults who belong to a religious house of worship. “Do you happen to be a member of a church, synagogue or mosque?” Gallup asked, and a reported 47% of U.S. adults answered, “No.”¹ A major limit of the poll is its lack of data about the membership trends of other religious traditions in the United States, as well as its preoccupation with “American citizens.” However, what seems clear is that religious membership in the U.S. has been steadily declining since Gallop began their polls over 80 years ago.

According to Gallup, the primary reasons for the decline in religious membership are twofold: the percentage of Americans who claim *no religious tradition* (the so called “nones”) is steadily increasing; secondly, the percentage of religiously affiliated Americans who claim *no membership* in a church, synagogue or mosque is also steadily increasing. While religious membership is largely correlated with age (66% of those born before 1946, compared to 36% of millennials reporting religious membership), the declining trend is true for all age groups, with less and less U.S. adults of all generations claiming membership in a local house of worship.

The trend correlates with what I have noticed in many religious and academic circles—while some scholars are eager to study the decline, others are increasingly anxious about the future of religious life and education. We clergy and religion professors are all asking similar questions about the loss of faith in organized religion, the decrease in funding for religious education, and even how organized religion and theological education might reinvent itself (or entrench) in order to counter the negative trends in religious affiliation. One of the main anxieties I hear voiced in many religious and academic circles parallels one of the questions of the Gallup poll: *why is everyone leaving?*

However, as a scholar-practitioner, what is most interesting about the Gallup poll to me is its

repeated use of the word *belong*: “In 2020, 47% of U.S. adults *belonged* to a church, synagogue or mosque.”² In other words, one way to read this poll is that *religious belonging is down and declining for decades*.

As it concerns belonging, though, what Gallup is really assessing in this poll remains unclear. Does “belonging” here refer to documented membership, frequency of attendance, degree of participation, a sense of connectedness to others? What if Gallup asked different questions, like have you ever felt deep connection to a local house of worship, and when did that change? Have you been microaggressed or rejected by a religious community? Did they fail to affirm your culture, your race, your heritage, your gender and sexuality? Did they police your beliefs, your politics, your ethics? Gallup specifically headlined individuals *leaving* rather than the communities they left, and they certainly did not ask about new inclinations toward neopagan and other non-mainline religious movements. A subtle shift in perspective might show that many people did not leave the church, synagogue, or mosque, but, for example, were *harmed, kicked out, rejected, turned away*. Or perhaps some of those people no longer experienced those places as relevant to their lives.

What I want to suggest is that the primary concern for us as scholars and practitioners is not whether or not people are increasingly *leaving* organized religion (other polls, for example the Public Religion Research Institute, suggest that trends of those leaving organized religion are beginning to stabilize).³ Rather, a primary concern should be that they (we) are all *searching* for somewhere, some people, some place to belong—a deep belonging that many of us sometimes struggle to find in the church, synagogue, mosque, or house of worship of our ancestors, much less in the nation state. As practical theologian Gregory C. Ellison II writes, “Belonging—the need for membership and acceptance in a specified group or space—is arguably the most essential of the four fundamental human needs.”⁴

In recent years, the topics of exclusion and belonging have gained much traction in practical theology and the study of religious practices. For example, the category of “multiple religious belonging” has proved generative for many scholars seeking to produce new comparative studies and interreligious dialogues. Meanwhile, other scholars question the category’s integrity and the very idea of an autonomous religious tradition at all. Consider Devaka Premawardhana’s provocative argument about the redundancy of multiple religious belonging and the impossibility that any tradition “exists independently of others.”⁵ Accordingly, Premawardhana writes, “To belong is already to multiply belong.”⁶

Some scholars have researched the absence or “*foreignness of belonging*,” as Nathaniel Roberts describes it in his ethnographic study of the social, religious, and moral worlds of India’s poor.⁷ Similarly, Willie James Jennings, in his work *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, critiques how whiteness and its norm of the “white self-sufficient man” thwart formation and belonging in theological education. Jennings issues a powerful summons: “Theological education must capture its central work—to form us in the art of cultivating belonging.”⁸

Issue 14 of *Practical Matters Journal* responds to Gallup’s findings, Jennings’ call, and this popular topic of research through its exploration of the theme *Exclusion, Belonging, and Becoming*

in Religious Communities. Our hope in this issue is that by exploring analyses of exclusion and belonging in our world, we might resuscitate curiosity and shed light on the future and promises of religious life and education, rather than simply assuming their decline and deterioration.

Many articles in this issue expose dynamics of exclusion in our world, addressing concerns about exclusion from the protections of the state, the discourses of the classroom, the theologies of our faith communities, and the politics of the ecclesial structures of the church. These same articles also open fresh insight into the meaning and practice of belonging in a variety of contexts, including a women's prison, a healthcare clinic, a seminary classroom, a local Black church, and an indigenous activist camp. Issue 14 of *Practical Matters* thus hosts a montage of images and practices of both exclusion and belonging in our world, with contributions from physicians, activists, educators, theologians, and practitioners.

IMAGES OF EXCLUSION

Numerous religious traditions uphold values of justice, community, and belonging, yet many also occupy ambivalent positions vis-à-vis systems and acts of exclusionary violence. Sometimes religion is the target and other times the perpetrator and accomplice. The study of religious practices has much to offer to conversations on the complex entanglement of religion and exclusion, and all articles in this issue offer something to this conversation by engaging local contexts.

Addressing the lives of those that Gallup most certainly did not survey, Rachele Green analyzes the dynamics of mass incarceration through the lens of exclusion, investigating how “prisons function as death-dealing environments that criminalize ways of being and belonging.”⁹ She unfolds a theory of the prison as a set of “social death practices” employed by the state to isolate people, punish them for not conforming, and diminish forms of connection and self-expression.

In a similar vein, Soon-IL Song assesses the criminalization of abortion. She argues that the commonly invoked “sanctity of life” stance in Christian pro-life abortion debates ignores scientific knowledge and the history of theology. Furthermore, Song reveals how these debates fail to connect to socioeconomic life-affirming factors, like the establishment of safe and affordable housing, and thereby function to harm women, children, and families. Courtney V. Buggs also addresses the neglect of women, specifically Black laywomen in the church. Through detailed qualitative research with two Black laywomen in the United Methodist Church, Buggs wrestles with the exclusion of Black laywomen from analysis in the academy and the invalidation of their implicit authority in the church.

Kyle B. T. Lambelet, Jennifer Lewis, and Aizaiah Yong all write about the theological underpinnings of exclusionary violence. In the context of Camp Oceti Sakowin in 2016, Lambelet studies how Christian clergy come to activism work first as “enemies to the earth and the people of the earth.”¹⁰ Lambelet exposes the harm embedded in the Christian “Doctrine of Discovery,” which creates a friend/enemy and European/native distinction (among others).

With a similar critique of Christian exceptionalism, Aizaiah Yong looks at the exclusion of multiple populations in the University classroom, for example, students of non-Christian faith

traditions and those with LGBTQIAA identities. Yong argues for the need to decolonize the pastoral care literature and its pedagogical practices to be more inclusive of diverse populations. Finally, Jennifer Lewis focuses on the lack of mercy towards the poor of the world in the context of a multitude of global crises, including the Covid-19 pandemic. Through analyses of seeing and hearing, Lewis declares, “Rather than a brother or sister who belongs to our community, we see a categorical ‘other,’ who does not fit into our circle of concern.”¹¹

As each of the authors in Issue 14 illuminate, violence often manifests as exclusion, whether it be theological, political, or social. While it takes a variety of forms and ideologies, exclusion is a practice of isolation and denial, referring to a variety of acts that isolate us from each other and deny our fundamental interconnectedness.

IMAGES OF BELONGING

On the flip side, many of the articles in this issue assess how communities respond to and resist exclusion with creative processes of becoming and transformation. As this issue works to convey, studying religious practices can help us understand how religious communities nurture belonging and work toward personal and collective becoming in more capacious ways.

For example, one might be surprised to find communities of rich belonging in a prison. Yet this is precisely what Green illuminates as she studies what she calls the “counter-environments” that women in prison create through practices of erotic creativity. These women refuse “to belong to the State,” and instead cultivate spaces and rituals of belonging to self, each other, and God.¹² Song makes a similar argument about abortion debates by broadening the discourse about “choice” to entail “the removal of oppressive socioeconomic barriers” in service to the “fullness of life” for all people.¹³

Moving from the level of population to the microhistories of two Black laywomen, Buggs highlights the “implicit authority” that is already operative and transformative in Black church contexts.¹⁴ Though they may be excluded from academic and ecclesial validation, Black laywomen reveal power beyond the pulpit in a multitude of ways that are recognized by their local communities. In the context of Camp Oceti Sakowin, Lambelet sketches a portrait of “indigenous belonging” in tandem with the process of becoming an ally to the land and its people—what he configures as a process of conversion, greatly nuancing many current conversations on coalition-building. Lambelet writes, “Belonging is an ongoing task, a spiritual discipline, as the Lakota have shown, of simultaneous resistance to the world making powers of settler capitalism and proleptic ally-making even as this world is falling away.”¹⁵

Yong too emphasizes belonging as a process. Attending to the theological classroom, Yong outlines a set of pedagogical practices that are “rooted in sacred connection” and “embodied knowledge.”¹⁶ The practices that Yong offers are integral for creating inclusive classrooms and compassionate caregivers. Finally, for her part, Lewis also attends to practices that shift from exclusion to belonging. Specifically, Lewis describes a theology and practice of mercy through

seeing and hearing others as “kin.”

Just as each of the contributors in this issue reveal that exclusion is a practice, so too they reveal that belonging is a practice requiring personal and communal devotion. Less a destination and more a process, belonging is about actively practicing a compassionate interconnectedness to self, others, and the earth. As a practice, belonging begins when we start showing up for ourselves and each other through erotic creativity, ally-building, activism, and embodied acts of seeing, hearing, teaching, organizing, proclaiming, and caring.

BELONGING AS A PRACTICE

The popular author, TED talk speaker, and sociological researcher Brené Brown has captured the hearts of many in our world today. Brown famously writes, “True belonging is not passive. It’s not the belonging that comes with just joining a group. It’s not fitting in or pretending or selling out because it’s safer. It’s a practice that requires us to be vulnerable, get uncomfortable, and learn how to be present with people without sacrificing who we are.”¹⁷ Each of the articles in Issue 14 echo Brown’s conceptualization and offer new criteria for assessing religious belonging in our world today.

The process of belonging begins through practice: when we repudiate colonialist theologies; when we practice conversion and allyship in political solidarity; when we recognize the implicit leadership of the historically discredited; when we extend mercy and cultivate erotic creativity with the neglected of society; when our teaching and caring prioritize sacred interconnection; when we see and hear each other as kin.

Of course, when we as a staff settled on *Exclusion, Belonging, and Becoming* as the theme for Issue 14, we had no idea that a global pandemic was right around the corner. The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly altered our sense of community in a global context of simultaneous social distancing and technological connection. It thus goes without saying that there is much left unsaid in this issue as it pertains to practices of exclusion and belonging. Our hope here at *Practical Matters* is that these articles continue an ongoing conversation and inspire new directions as we all seek to better study and practice belonging. To reiterate Jennings’ poignant insight, “The deepest struggle for us all is a struggle for communion.”¹⁸

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NOTES

¹ Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time,” *Gallup* (2021). <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>

² Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time,” (emphasis mine).

³ PRRI Staff, “The 2020 Census of American Religion,” *PRRI* (2021). <https://www.prii.org/research/2020-census-of-american-religion/#page-section-1>

⁴ Gregory C. Ellison, *Cut Dead but Still Alive: Caring for African American Young Men* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013): 140.

⁵ Devaka Premawardhana, “The Unremarkable Hybrid: Aloysius Pieris and the Redundancy of Multiple Religious Belongin,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46.1 (2011): 101

⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁷ Nathaniel Roberts, *To Be Cared For: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum* (Oakland: Univ. of CA Press, 2016).

⁸ Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020): 10.

⁹ Rachele Green, “Carve Out Living Space: Creativity, Counter-environments, and the Formation of Salvific Community in Prison,” *Practical Matters Journal* 14 (2021): 14.

¹⁰ Kyle B. T. Lambelet, “Becoming Allies: Friends, Enemies, and the End of the World at Camp Oceti Sakowin,” *Practical Matters Journal* 14 (2021): 28.

¹¹ Jennifer Lewis, “Moved to Mercy: A Practical Theological Examination of Sight and Sound in Motivating Merciful Action,” *Practical Matters Journal* 14 (2021): 82.

¹² Green, “Carve Out Living Space,” 16.

¹³ Soon Il-Song, “The Fullness of Life: A Progressive Christian Formulation,” *Practical Matters Journal* 14 (2021): 102.

¹⁴ Courtney V. Buggs, “Kaleidoscope Authorities: Reflections on African American Laywomen’s Leadership,” *Practical Matters Journal* 14 (2021): 50.

¹⁵ Lambelet, “Becoming Allies,” 41.

¹⁶ Aizaiah Yong, “Experiencing Care Within: Introducing a Pedagogy of Sacred Connection for Teaching Pastoral

Theology & Spiritual Care,” *Practical Matters Journal* 14 (2021): 105.

¹⁷ Brené Brown. *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone* (Random House, 2017): 37.

¹⁸ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 10.