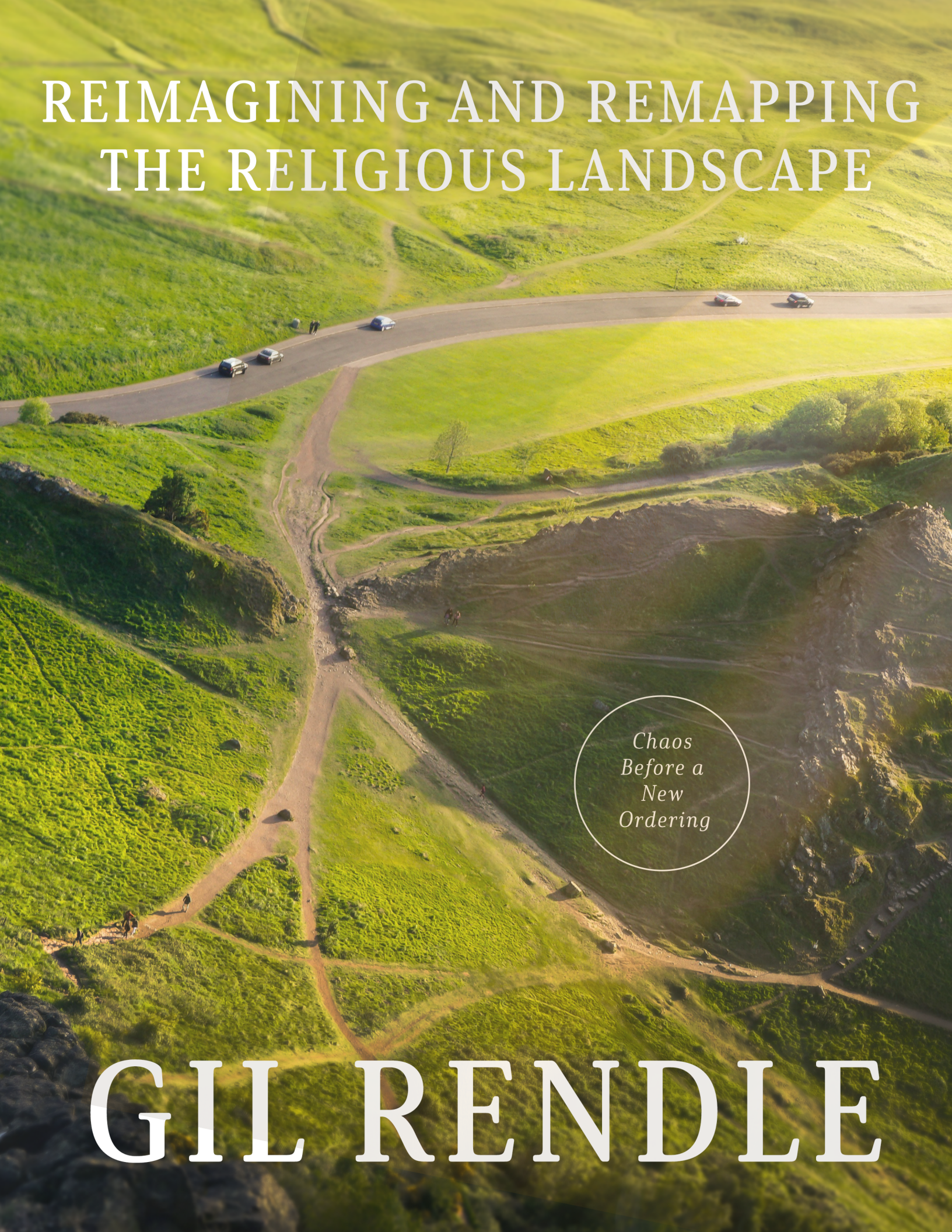
REIMAGINING AND REMAPPING THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE



Chaos Before a New Ordering

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July 2025

Presented by

WESLEYAN IMPACT PARTNERS
IGNITING IMAGINATION

TEXAS METHODIST FOUNDATION
STEWARDING POTENTIAL

PURPOSE

This monograph is an experiment to see if a change in the lens by which we perceive the current quickly changing, religious landscape may be of help. The proposed switch is from viewing the landscape through congregations to viewing the landscape through people's search for meaning. Meaning making is how we make sense of our world and then make sense of our place in that world. In fact, meaning making is one of the prime ways in which people use congregations. Our search for meaning often includes an affirmation of God and the transcendent that so many people carry within themselves.

Then again, as we will see, it may not.

But whether it is a search for the transcendent or simply a search for one's place in the world, following the ways in which people pursue their meaning making may show us more about the religious landscape than just what is happening to congregations.

THE DOMINANT LENS

The dominant lens used up to this point to understand the religious landscape has been congregational. That is, to date the religious landscape has largely been described by what is happening to congregations. Denominations have been measuring membership, average attendance at worship, baptisms, the number of youths, and financial giving – and since the mid 1960s have recorded a steady shrinking in all of these measures.

Meanwhile the Pew Foundation has been measuring the growing cohort of those who are "spiritual but not religious"[1] (SBNR). The Pew Religious Landscape Study has offered an important contribution exposing and measuring a new movement in America. And the movement has been significant. In 2007 22% of the adults in the United States identified as religiously unaffiliated. By 2014 that percentage grew to 29%. As noted in the study, "the number of religiously unaffiliated adults has increased by roughly 19 million since 2007. There are now *[in 2015 at the time of the release of the report]* approximately 56 million religiously unaffiliated adults in the U.S., and this group – sometimes called religious

'nones' – is more numerous that either Catholics or Mainline Protestants, according to the new survey."[2]

Note, however, that the Pew research is still a congregational measure. Measuring how many adults identify with a particular religion is a measure of what is happening to congregations – given that the congregation is the most basic organizational form of the religious tradition that the adult identifies with. The Pew research is based on a nationally representative telephone survey of 35,071 adults. "In this study, respondents' religious affiliation (also sometimes referred to as 'religious identity') is based on self-reports. Catholics, for instance, are defined as all respondents who say they are Catholic, regardless of their specific beliefs and whether they attend Mass regularly."[3] It is a measure of how people self-identify with what established congregations represent.

Note also that, the Pew findings do not provide a stable measure. In a follow up study in 2023 the Pew Research Center released a report titled "Has the Rise of Religious 'Nones' Come to an End in the U.S.?"[4] Their conclusion to their own question is that it is too soon to tell. They reported that the percentage of adults self-identifying as religiously unaffiliated, which had risen to 31% of the American population by 2023, had fallen by 3 points to 28% in 2024. Something different is happening to the steady climb of the religiously unaffiliated that began at 22% in 2007. The landscape is again changing.

"Affiliation with traditional religious traditions and the accompanying participation in congregations continues to fall.

But that is not the full story. "

Further, self-reported affiliation to religious traditions and their congregations, as noted, is not the same as belief or faith. In his article on "The Vast Dechurching and the Paradox of Christianity's Decline," Firmim DeBrabander affirms the notion that there is "a fatigue with church institutions, a feeling that they no longer offer inspiration or clear and certain guidance."[5] However, he continues, the response to church institutions is not the sum of what is happening spiritually. DeBrabander states the paradox: that while affiliation to church institutions is falling, "interestingly, and perhaps surprisingly, a majority of

American 'nones' – a sizable majority at that – report they 'believe in God or another higher power.' A similar percentage of them believe in a personal soul and a transcendent or spiritual realm beyond the physical world. In Europe, the data vary by country, but, by and large, a prominent portion of the religiously unaffiliated report similar beliefs."[6]

So, yes. Affiliation with traditional religious traditions and the accompanying participation in congregations continues to fall. But that is not the full story. In part the trend away from all congregations is not yet definitive. In addition, both those who remain in congregations, as well as a majority of those who no longer affiliate with them still hold a belief in a power greater than themselves and an openness to a realm beyond their immediate perception and experience.

The story is not just about congregational demise and the number of people who are no longer "religious." Something more is afoot. And measuring change by what is happening to congregations, while important, is insufficient to describe the chaos that is building, perhaps toward a new cosmos. Is there another way to see what is happening?

SOMETHING MORE IS AFOOT – TAKING CHAOS SERIOUSLY

The land beyond the looking glass is a confusing place. Lewis Caroll published his story of Alice in Wonderland in December of 1871 telling of a young girl climbing through a mirror into a "wonderland" of different rules and assumptions where all was reversed. Right was left – like in all mirrors. Staying in place required running ahead. Moving forward had the result of being further away. Inanimate objects (playing cards and chess pieces) were alive, and things alive (the Cheshire cat) could simply evaporate. Being in a wonderland proved to be very confusing.

This is the land many traditional congregations feel caught in. For many, getting better at what once always worked seems now to push people away instead of drawing them in. Clergy find themselves running faster – with fuller weekly schedules – only to maintain what has always been. Newer and newer ideas fall on the ears of congregations

filled with older and older people with less and less energy to be interested in them. There is a feeling of demise at hand. And the feeling reflects the reality. In only 20 short years the percentage of small Protestant congregations with an average worship attendance of 100 or fewer people has gone from 45% in 2000 to 70% in 2020. In that same period of twenty years the median worship attendance among Protestant denominations has dropped anywhere between 28% (United Methodist) to 40% (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America).[7] Already older and older, most established congregations tend to be getting smaller and smaller, feeling they have less and less of a future.

It is possible to look at the American religious landscape in this way. It is easy to see a landscape in demise, with the future of religious institutions threatened by the dwindling number of adherents, shrinking resources, and with prodigious leadership energy being spent only to shore them up. That's one way of looking at the religious landscape.

But. But, what if….

What if the demise that so many leaders see is only one piece of a larger chaos with a purpose.

CHAOS AND COSMOS

Chaos is a word describing the confused, unorganized state of primordial matter in the time prior to the creation of different and more distinct forms. Importantly, chaos often leads to cosmos – the state of an orderly, harmonious, system. A cosmos is a complex, self-ordered, self-inclusive system. In times of a cultural turning, one must go through chaos to get to cosmos. In fact, chaos is the only path leading to cosmos in a self-ordering world.

Modern physics gives us clues to help us better trust the confusing religious and spiritual chaos we see and feel around us. Consider energy. There is a lot of energy bouncing around in the religious landscape of this new century – a lot of dust being kicked up around the decline of traditional religion, while there is a seemingly parallel dustup about those who are "spiritual but not religious." We are at the time of a cultural turning of values that is

producing bursts of entrepreneurial energy that is being met with bursts of institutional revamping. There is energy all around. In physics, the Law of the Conservation of Energy states that energy cannot be created or destroyed, it can only be transformed from one form to another. What if we are not just experiencing a religious demise but are actually in the midst of a larger chaotic energy storm that is in search of new religious and spiritual forms. Through the work of Nobel prize physicist Ilya Prigogine, we learned of the phenomena in which self-renewal and self-transcendence operate as principles of self-organizing systems.[8] Any system (such as a religious landscape), held in chaos long enough, has the potential to self- organize. It can renew itself and reorganize at a higher order beyond its former self to accommodate and relate more effectively with its environment. It can self-organize – at a higher level than before. What Prigogine demonstrated is that a system held in chaos can transform itself as a self-organized system operating at a higher level – but that the researcher can neither control nor predict when the system will transform, nor what the new system will be like. Systems held at the threshold of change in chaos for a sufficient period of time reorder themselves in a higher order in a mysterious way. The process and timing of the reordering are not to be understood or controlled. It is a mystery. That is quite a conclusion from the hard science discipline of physics. And it is a part of the shift from mechanical to quantum physics.

"In this is an affirmation for religious people to trust the chaos about us. Because we know mystery."

In this is an affirmation for religious people to trust the chaos about us. Because we know mystery. We know what was, we clearly know the present turmoil that is, but what will be in the future is currently beyond our prediction or control. We accept it as mystery. And we are a people of mystery who willingly and ritually proclaim the memorial acclamation "Christ died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again". We don't know how or when – but because of the way in which we have been formed by text and tradition, we trust. And we prepare ourselves to be reordered yet again.

Consider the so often quoted verse Isaiah 43:19 – "Look! I'm doing a new thing; now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it?" It is curious how often I have come across this text

in the past decade as people search about for answers in a confusing time. Importantly the central, dual theme of the 43rd chapter of Isaiah where this text is located is about fear and remembering. The prophet is assuring the people that a new thing is happening by God's hand. "Look! I'm doing a new thing." But the rest of the text surrounding that, oh so quotable, verse tells of the need to not fear what is coming and to not remember the prior things as if the old ways are the necessary ways. Reading the full chapter of Isaiah is the reminder that God's new thing requires us to manage our fears and to let go of old things. Something new is happening, but it is a mystery. It is God's mystery. We don't predict. We don't control.

Perhaps the first challenge for religious leaders is to face into mystery without fear and without being overly constrained by what they remember about their own religious institutions. Can we consider that the chaos that we are feeling and seeing about us is, perhaps, creativity in motion? Can we consider it to be chaos in search of cosmos? Can we allow that a reordering is happening? By looking and learning we might find a way to live in the new landscape with the gifts of our faith still in hand.

One start is to draw a map of the new landscape – beginning with what we currently see and leaving space for what is yet to be.

A NEW MAP BEGINS BY CHANGING THE LENS: MEANING MAKING

To set the stage, let's begin with the grand overview. World religion scholar, Huston Smith offers a universalism about the central importance of meaning in our lives:

> Wherever people live, whenever they live, they find themselves faced with three inescapable problems: how to win food and shelter from their natural environment (the problem nature poses), how to get along with one another (the social problem), and how to relate themselves to the total scheme of things (the religious problem). If this third

> issue seems less important than the other two, we should remind ourselves that religious artifacts are the oldest that archeologists have discovered.[9]

So, there is a universal quest for understanding how the person, the individual, is related to creation. How does one fit in? How does one order his or her life, and by what values and behaviors?

The beginning of the scientific revolution in the 1600s seemed to offer a path of understanding and progress toward fitting into the total scheme of creation by giving answers to life questions through an empirical and experimental process, based on evidence, that would offer both understanding and control. But as prolific as science has been it has not "saved" us even from ourselves. Consider the Manhattan Project and the disturbances and dislocations of social technology. Technical progress was achieved, creation was further "mastered." But it also brought death and the demise of community. The question of meaning was not addressed by the progress of science, yet it still could not be avoided. Philosopher Ken Wilber differentiates between science and religion by noting that the province of science is truth, while the province of religion is meaning.[10] Truth can provide facts, but the discipline of science is value free – telling us what is, but not what could be or should be. It is religion that provides meaning by joining facts with experience, background, and wisdom. Wilber, in his philosophical search for a wider understanding of life argues for a marriage of science and religion, of "sense and soul." It is this marriage that people seek with the meaning making drive that provides a way for the individual to be and to do in the world that they encounter.

Which brings us to Emil Durkheim. Durkheim was an early French sociologist who, along with Karl Marx and Max Weber, was credited with establishing the formal discipline of sociology by arguing that the study of culture and of society was a legitimate academic pursuit. Durkheim was a functionalist, pursuing the purpose of collective behavior – understanding why people (in the collective) do what they do, and what purpose it serves. For Durkheim the functional purpose of religion had to do with people's search for meaning and their need for meaning making.

Durkheim led the way to understanding religion as "meaning making" that depends on four constructs.[11]

People need to shape and to claim:

1. Meaning: A story (or theory) that provides the individual a way to understand the world – how the world works and what drives it.
2. Purpose: A way and a place through which the individual can find his or her place in that world – how the individual should think and behave that conforms to how they believe the world works.
3. Community: A group of others who share their belief in the way the world works and who seek to behave as he or she does in that world; and
4. Rituals: Behaviors and practices to follow that (a) mark or identify those who are a part of the community, and that (b) serve to remind that community of their story (or theory) of how their world works.

Practicing a faith provides for all four of these components. Raised in the Christian tradition I was formed in a narrative of a world that was made by a creative God, for a covenanting people, who would live by the law of love (meaning making #1). I would learn, through that narrative, to honor God and to love my neighbor as myself (meaning making #2). On Sundays I would find a community of people in my local congregation who also saw what I saw and tried to behave as I tried to behave (meaning making #3). In that congregation we would sing hymns, worship with creeds and sacraments, and attend Bible studies, all designed to remind us of what we believed together and remind us of why we were part of a community with one another (meaning making #4). From a sociological perspective, my life in a congregation was a practice of meaning making that connected me to a transcendent God. People, throughout time, have used congregations in this way.

It is at this point that meaning making allows for a much fuller mapping of the current religious landscape because it is not limited to the coherence of traditional religion or the fate of congregations. Meaning making can be expressed in unlimited ways that go

"Meaning making can be expressed in unlimited ways that go well beyond one's experience in a congregation..."

well beyond one's experience in a congregation, and it is not always seeking either transcendence or a connection beyond one's immediate experience. Going to an opposing extreme, consider that if a congregation and a religious faith provides a path to meaning making, so too does the militant organization of the Proud Boys that believes in a world formed by traditional masculinity and Western Culture. The narrative of the Proud Boys is of a world that has taken away what belongs to white males, and which leads them to racist behavior backed by violence. Their group provides participants with a community of like-minded others and leads to practices and rituals to bind them together – all parallel aspects of a Durkheimian sociology by which members seek meaning, much like people in congregations do. Identified as a neofascist, white national organization, the Proud Boys operates outside of the morality of a common good and so, offers an opposing counterpoint to Christianity which lives very centered in the moral sphere of a common good covenanted by a transcendent God. Yet, both are meaning making at work.

The point being that meaning making can go far and wide from a traditional understanding of religion – and from the form of a faith-based congregation. Yet, as I hope to show, the contemporary search for meaning – released from the constraints of traditional religion – allows us to both see and understand the current creative energy exploding entrepreneurially across the religious landscape. Where the previous exclusive attention to congregations kept us within traditional definitions of religion and constrained our maps, a focus on meaning making allows for a map that is much more chaotic, inclusive, and perhaps more instructive.

The new lens of meaning making allows us to ask two new questions important to our changing religious landscape:

1. Where do people now seek meaning?
2. How do they organize themselves in their seeking?

Describing the Terrain

Using the above two questions allows us to describe the scope of the field that constitutes the religious landscape in a different way. The dual questions of "where?" and "how people organize?" provide the variables that this monograph will use to construct an organizing field, a map. Certainly, there are other fields and other variables that can be used. Nevertheless, let us test what can be seen using the questions at hand.

THE HORIZONTAL FIELD – "WHERE?"

Here we will use the simple and self-evident differentiation of sacred vs. non-sacred. This is a familiar binary distinction that relies on our cultural familiarity with religious institutions. Sacred space is that space where the Holy Other can be sought within the cathedrals, churches, seminaries, retreat centers, camps, historic sites, and gathering places of the institutional church. Non-sacred space is everyplace else that is encountered once the individual steps over the boundary of what we call sacred space. The religious landscape has always had a movable boundary between sacred and non-sacred space based on how much of the cultural and political territory the church claimed for itself, or vice-versa. However, for the purpose of this monograph we will remain with the familiar binary that locates sacred space as "inside" the organized institutional church and locates non-sacred space as "outside" the organized institutional church.

As we will see, by no longer limiting our mapping of a religious landscape that is contained within the territory of the congregation alone, the field of view is greatly expanded and can include many new discoveries.

THE VERTICAL FIELD – "HOW PEOPLE ORGANIZE?"

The vertical field that seeks to describe how people organize themselves in the search for meaning is a bit more complicated using three different forms of organizations. The forms at each end of this pole are loosely constructed forms of organization, and the form in the middle is tight.

1. Beginning at the bottom of the field is the voluntary association organization which individuals connect with, and become part of, by choice – claiming an alignment with others through both identity and purpose. One voluntarily steps inside this kind of organization and becomes one with it. Belonging assumes a commitment of participation, loyalty, and volunteer as well as financial support. A typical form of commitment to a religious voluntary association organization is framed by a membership vow such as the one found in the ritual of the United Methodist denomination. At the point of being received as a member, the clergy will ask: "As a member of this congregation, will you faithfully participate in its ministry by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, and your service?" The person seeking membership is expected to answer: "I will."[12] Participation in, loyalty to, and financial support of the organization are framed as expectations through

such vows. Persons belonging to a voluntary association organization can be said to be "embedded", using Ted Smith's language adapted from German sociologists Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim.[13] Embedded indicates that the individual identifies with, and becomes one with, the organization and its purpose. (Is this how I understand the world to be? Does being here strengthen who I am? Do I fit into this community?") Such identification and "belonging" is an aspect of a highly consensual "WE" culture in which the individual defers self and gives priority to the group. One "embeds" oneself in a voluntary association organization in order to be a part of a group and to become more like the other persons in the group as defined by the purpose of the organization.

Note again that this is a loose form of organization. It is commonly easy to step into a voluntary association organization. One simply shows up and expresses interest – and the leaders introduce the person to the path to membership, the path to embedding. It is also equally easy to step out of a voluntary association organization. One simply stops showing up – and there are few, if any, sanctions to ending the connection with the organization (beyond any relational peer pressure from others in the organization).

2. In the middle of this organizational field is the employment-based organization, which is often seen as the opposite of a voluntary association organization. Employment-based organizations do not depend upon participants connecting through identity and purpose (although this is highly encouraged by many employment-based organizations). Participants are not required to be either embedded or disembedded in such organization. Rather the relationship between the individual and the organization is much more transactional – an exchange of talents, skills, and performance from individuals in return for compensation and / or other benefits.

Rather than being a loose organization, employment-based organizations are very tight. They are difficult to get into, requiring applications, demonstrations or certifications of skills and talents, and agreement to terms of employment. Once in such an organization the participant can behave and express himself or herself as an individual – but only within the constraints of the rules and norms of the organization. This form of organization is also more difficult to leave. One cannot simply choose to not participate, and there are often requirements and, at times, legal sanctions defining how either party can end the relationship.

3. At the top of this vertical field are free form organizations. These can be thought of as movements, groups, or tribes in which participants are distinctly disembedded. They are loose (free form) organizational forms congruent with, and perhaps the product of, a low consensus individual "I" culture that gives priority to the self above the group. Culturally these free form organizations now exist (with surprisingly little internal structure, governance, or overhead) in a technological world through the Internet and social media that makes possible relational connection without the requirement of being physically present. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim describe this moment as a "second modernity":

> …in which an individual undergoes a "disembedding without re-embedding" into new communities that take primacy over the individual. If prior eras made kinship networks, religions, classes, nations, voluntary associations primary, in the "second modernity" the individual becomes, for the first time in history, the basic unit of social reproduction. Broken out of communities that defined the meaning of the individual and collective life, individuals in the second modernity have to make their own way…. Stripped of ready-made biographies, the

> individual becomes homo optionis, a person defined by having choices – and bearing the costs of them – in every part of life.[14]

> In free form organizations such as groups, movements, or tribes, there may or may not be a hierarchical center which designs and directs the purpose and action of the group. Structured through identity, issue, shared interest, technological platform, or social change, these free organizational forms are very loose, usually with highly permeable boundaries that individuals can enter or leave at will – and in which individuals can even be present (i.e., lurking) and follow without making their presence known. It may be as simple as disembedded individuals testing whether what a free form organization does or represents is a part of the identity that they are constructing for themselves. Does the free form reflect the identity, feelings, or aspirations that disembedded individuals seek to express for themselves? As long as the free form organization satisfies the self-framed questions the individual seeks to answer the individual will connect with / participate in the free form organization. When the free form organization no longer serves the self-framed questions that the individual is seeking to answer the individual will disconnect.

THE TERRAIN

Merging the vertical and horizontal fields outlined above gives us a map by which we can now describe the complexity and chaos of the new religious landscape. The full terrain looks like figure 1 below. As we will see, traditional religious congregations have their place(s) on this new map so we will begin the populating of the terrain with them. But it will immediately become apparent that there is a very great deal of chaotic energy going on across a much wider landscape. The first step is always to begin with what we know and are

most certain of, remembering that there is still a good bit of meaning making going on that we have not yet seen, all of which is part of the new religious landscape.

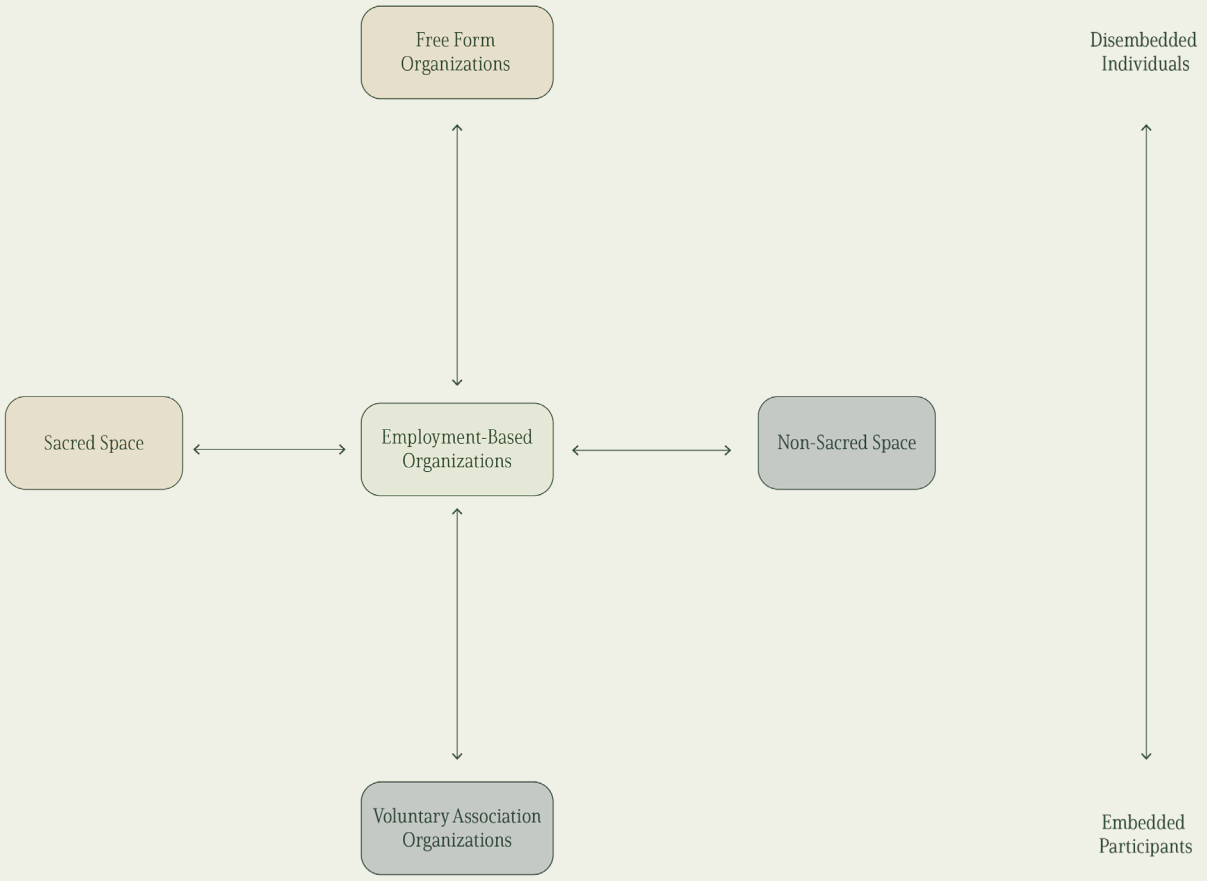

Figure. 1: Basic Terrain of the New Religious Landscape

POPULATING THE TERRAIN: PART 1

We will begin with the most familiar form of religious meaning making, the traditional congregation. Using the questions of "where?" and "what kind of organization?",

traditional congregations can be located at four places on the map as indicated in Figure 2 below.

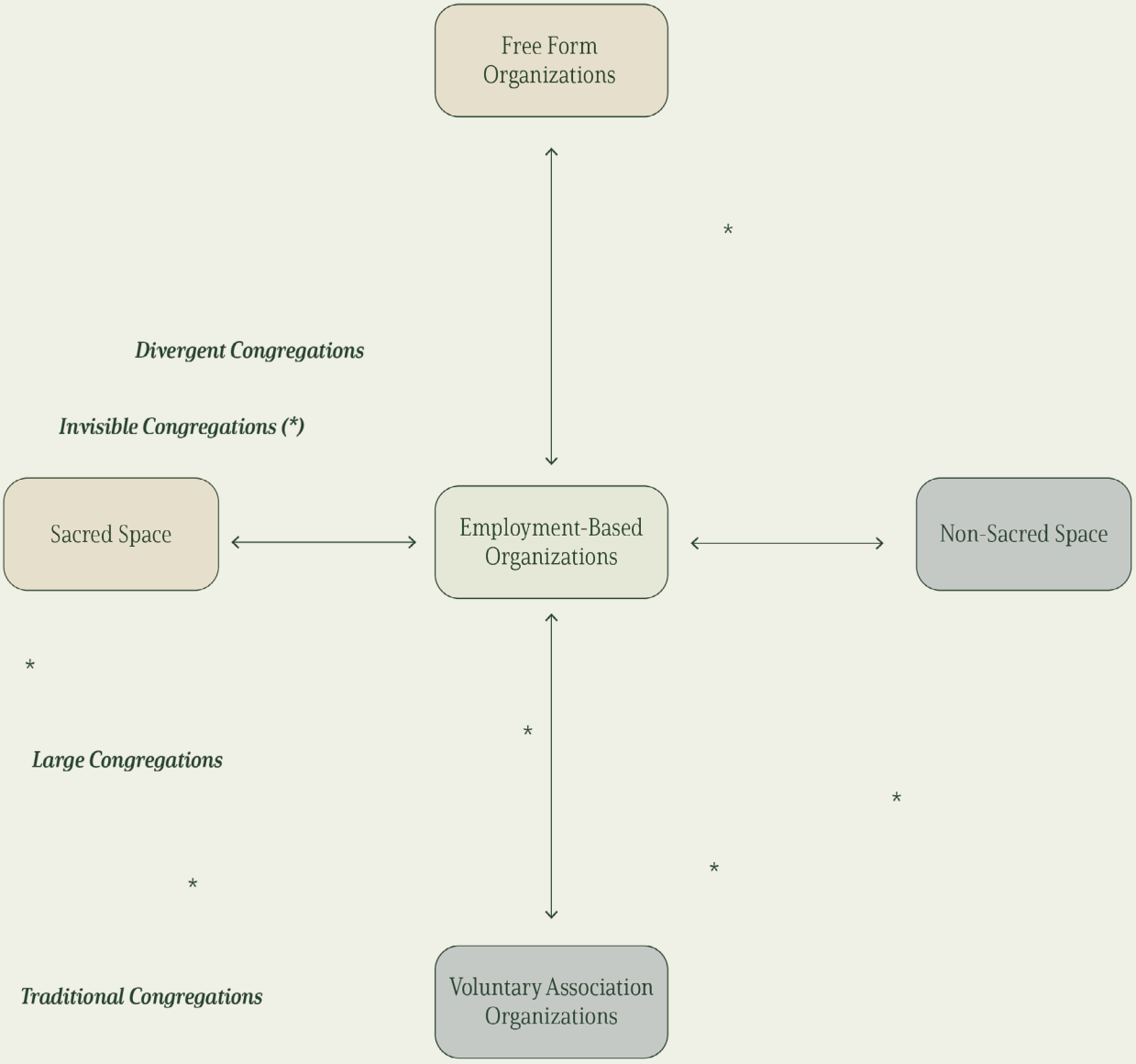

Figure 2: The Traditional Congregation

The Traditional Congregation

The traditional congregation is located at the bottom corner of the lower left quadrant on the map. This is the form of religious organization most closely linked to a denomination. Traditional congregations, as noted, have been closely tracked by those denominations and by researchers, becoming the focus of anxiety over the continued decline of people and resources, and of their future viability.

Perhaps most important is to understand that the voluntary association organization is the structural form that congregations have consistently used for the past 250 or more years. It is also currently the form of organization that has suffered a significant cultural setback beginning in the 1960s because of a turning of cultural values and practices that I describe in chapter 3 of my book Countercultural: Subversive Resistance and the Neighborhood Congregation.[15] Being "embedded" in such voluntary association organizations – having a close personal identity with, being a regular, active participant and worker in, supporting with a on-going financial commitment – is now a foreign practice to most Americans who live in a culture focused on the individual rather than on the group and the common good.

Notably the traditional congregation is one of the very last organizations left on the American cultural field that continues to so closely practice the voluntary association model of organization. Most other voluntary associations have either become extinct, such as the Elks or Odd Fellows, or have been significantly weakened, such as the Masons, Optimists, American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, B'nai B'rith, Knights of Columbus, Parent Teacher Organizations, 4-H - all among a much longer list of others. A good number of voluntary association organizations have changed their structure to become more heavily staff driven to accommodate the changed cultural values – as we will see below with the larger congregations. Some have learned to be "associations" in which staff do the professional work of the organization and "membership" is limited to financial support and connection through letters and newsletters / emails and links that update members on the activities of the organization.

Because the traditional congregation has experienced a cultural dislocation as a voluntary association organization it has resulted in congregations that are both aging and shrinking.

This dislocation challenges traditional congregations with the question of a sustainable future. Consider one congregation I worked with recently. They had increased their activity and vitality over the past few years. Through good leadership and persistence, attendance and giving increased, bible study was reinstituted, a small youth program started, and projects in the community were supported by a fair number of church members. Vitality was up. But sustainability was nonetheless in question. The members of the congregation were, for the most part, older and retired. A full 67% of the financial giving from the membership came from only 6 giving units. Of those 6 giving units, 5 were individuals or couples who were old enough to be retired. Given that the cultural dislocation makes drawing new members to such organizations increasingly difficult and given that differences in generational giving patterns suggests that it now takes 8 to 10 new members to match the giving level of one older, established member, this congregation, despite its increased vitality, faces a significant challenge to a sustainable future.

The traditional congregation is certainly on the new map of the changing religious landscape. But its position as a voluntary association organization operating exclusively in sacred space indicates its vulnerability in a changed culture. Without any changes to make cultural accommodations such congregations, once the stalwart of organized religion, are challenged with sustainability into the future. Many will simply get smaller and smaller until they close.

The Large Congregation

One of the cultural accommodations some congregations have accomplished is growth sufficient to allow for an institutional form that varies from the classic voluntary association organization. Congregations with an average attendance at worship of 350 or above can more easily staff their organization in ways that compensate for the cultural drop off of involvement and volunteerism that were once the hallmarks of the traditional congregation. These larger congregations utilize staff for program leadership and for the "back office" organizational operations that sustain the congregation such as accounting, building maintenance, and communication. They have learned to streamline governance

with smaller boards, fewer committees, and more directive pastoral leadership. Even the concept of membership has been reframed to be a form of participation so that the idea of membership that once called for vows, as well as regular and continuous involvement, has been transformed into an associational relationship that allows participants to pick and choose their involvement. This picking and choosing is a form of cultural "unbundling" which will be discussed later.

Large congregations, like a good number of other, once more strictly voluntary organizations such as scouting, Kiwanis, and a host of non-profits, have learned to staff up. Staffing up, using staff to replace the leadership of volunteers who once saw local and regional involvement as a cultural norm, allows for a less embedded affiliation of participants and supporters. Membership is no longer a question of being either "in" or "out" of the congregation. In the large congregation membership and participation allows for being partially in and partially out – by choosing which activities to engage and which to ignore – a relationship that more easily accommodates an individualistic culture in which people structure their own identities.

"...using staff to replace the leadership of volunteers who once saw local and regional involvement as a cultural norm, allows for a less embedded affiliation of participants and supporters."

It also moves these congregations to a different location on the religious terrain closer to employment-based organization yet still operating in sacred space. The move toward an employment-based organization provides a different business model for the large congregations that will more easily sustain them in the future. They more easily provide programming tailored to the needs and interests of smaller market segments of the people in their communities and are much more agile and adaptive allowing them to change with the needs and interests of the people around them. They have also learned how to fund their work using younger generational values, patterns, and digital tools. As such, they occupy a different space on the new map from the traditional congregation.

Divergent Congregations

Another form of congregation that can be mapped is the "divergent" congregation, a name used by Tim Shapiro and Kara Faris in their book about alternative faith communities.[16] Divergent congregations are religious organizations sensitive to and deeply engaged in their neighborhood contexts. More than a traditional congregation that seeks and receives new members from the neighborhood, these congregations seek to become participants in the neighborhood. They understand the neighborhood to be the immediate mission field of their hope and purpose.

From a much larger perspective the importance of the neighborhood has grown exponentially in a world in which any effort of progress, governance, or even compromise at the regional, national, or global level is met with gridlock.[17] Politically and culturally, gridlock is the product of what James Davison Hunter calls "warring hegemonic projects" – the contest of competing cultural worldviews in which opposing sides each see the other as enemy. In such a cultural war the object of engagement is not progress, but winning so that one side can enforce their values and practices on the other.[18] In such an arena nothing moves ahead without contest and restraint. It is only at the local level, at the level of neighborhood, that community can be built – where neighbor sees neighbor eyeball to eyeball and where people can work alongside one another together to address shared needs and worries despite whatever differences might otherwise divide them. The neighborhood is where congregations are located.

"It is only at the local level, at the level of neighborhood, that community can be built."

Divergent congregations see the neighborhood as context. Rather than be attractional in their ministry (seeking to attract people from outside to come into the congregation as members), these congregations seek to be missional (going out into the neighborhood as participants and supporters of what God is already up to and doing "out there" with others.) These congregations can be seen as an outgrowth of the Fresh Expressions Movement that

began in the Church of England in 2004 as part of a search for "a form of church for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church."[19]

Shapiro and Faris' work brings further clarity and definition to these congregations which have found a new location on the religious landscape in the upper left quadrant of the map. They are more deeply connected to the neighborhood (living a bit less in totally sacred space) and a bit closer to the free form, movement, space that requires collaboration with unembedded individuals. Shapiro and Faris define divergent congregations as:

1. worshipping congregations
2. with a steadfast focus on a special topic (i.e., they don't seek to do everything and be all things to all people)
3. in which the special topic is highly related to the surrounding community (i.e., the steadfast focus arises out of the specific need and gifts of the neighborhood)
4. in a highly contextualized way (i.e., the steadfast focus is expressed in a way determined and directed by the neighborhood context.)

These congregations are open systems in which they focus, "not on the church itself, but on life and meaning."[20] As such they become much more important in a culture where people are actively and individually seeking and shaping meaning for themselves. Many of these congregations are experiential and experimental which suggests that some portion of them may also be unsustainable for a long-term future. But for the time that they are here, they have found a new place on the terrain of the religious landscape and offer a variation to the traditional voluntary association congregation.

Invisible Congregations

Continuing to populate the map of the new religious landscape we can add "invisible congregations" which are congregations that don't show up in denominational record

keeping, sociological studies, phone book listings, and perhaps not even on the Internet. The multiple asterisks that appear on the map in Figure 2 reflect the diversity of identities, organizational structures, and relationships with their neighborhoods found among these invisible congregations.

For decades the Religious Congregations and Membership Survey (RCMS) has been a primary sociological instrument with which congregations have been studied. Using data supplied by 200 Christian denominations and 16 non-Christian groups, the steady estimate over time for the number of congregations in the United States has been around 350,000. However, in a much more granular study, the team of Melton, Ferguson, and Foertsch examined three counties, each in a different part of the United States, and uncovered a surprising number of invisible congregations that would add significantly to that 350,000 number.

Beginning with the RCMS database these researchers searched local church directories (telephone books, internet directories), conducted a physical search of the counties for unreported church buildings that were confirmed to be active, and did an Internet search of 800+ denominations not reported by the RCMS.[21] The summary results of their work in the three counties can be seen below in Table 1.

Table 1: Invisible Congregations

County	RCMS Count	Additional congregations	Total	% underreported
McLennan County, TX	387	140	527	26.5%
Whatcom County, WA	150	100	250	40%
Richmond County, VA	766	265	1031	25.7%

In the three counties studied, the number of unreported, and therefore invisible congregations, ranged from 25% to 40% of the total which suggests a significant reordering of the religious landscape. An observation of the researchers was that the level of invisible

congregations suggests there is an overall increase in religious affiliation in the United States. They further speculated that such invisible congregations may be the product of population growth and migration into the counties under study, by the increase of ethnic congregations which are more difficult to count, and by non-denominational and new denominational congregations that do not have more familiar public profiles.

While invisible congregations have many and varied faces and forms, one clear example is the Latino congregations that have found Prosperity Gospel Pentecostalism as an avenue for integration into the American culture. In his study Tony Tian – Ren Lin describes how Latino immigrants use these congregations as socialization stations (as did so many earlier waves of immigrants from Europe and other parts of the world) in which they learn the logic and norms of the communities in which they find themselves.[22] Motivated by the promise of prosperity and health, connection to these congregations promotes the disciplines of hard work, sacrifice, and purposefulness that immigrants use to find their place in the larger community and culture. One of the congregations Tian – Ren Lin studied was the Iglesia Cristiana del Padre which is led by Pastor Federico Gielis who is a mortgage loan officer by day and pastor of the church on nights and weekends. Functioning as they do on prosperity theology puts congregations such as Iglesia Cristiana del Padre outside of a connection with established Pentecostal denominations such as the Assemblies of God. Being non-denomination adds to their invisibility. Such congregations are, nonetheless, an addition to the new terrain with a purpose, structure, and financial model different from the traditional voluntary association congregation.

Note that such neo-Pentecostal immigrant congregations do not by any means make up the full array of the invisible congregations now on the religious landscape. They constitute only one example of the congregations that are learning to thrive without denominational identity and voluntary association form. We will find other invisible congregations with quite different purposes and forms as we continue to populate the new religious landscape, as the scattered asterisks on the map suggest.

POPULATING THE TERRAIN: PART 2

The Great Unbundling and the Move Out of Sacred Space

In this second part of the effort to populate the terrain of the new religious landscape a few new ideas and insights are needed because we will be moving past the traditional congregation that operates in familiar sacred space. Moving past the familiar requires new markers to enable the connections between the familiar and unfamiliar to be seen. What is constant between Part 1 and Part 2 of this map making (and will continue in Part Three) is the persistent human search for meaning. Meaning-making still drives people whether they cling to traditional ways or whether they set out to discover new forms that will bring sense and purpose to their living. What is new on the religious landscape is that the more recent forms and experiences may not, at first glance, strike the observer as a practice of religious faith, as indeed they may not be. They are, however, efforts toward a construction of a personal spirituality in various forms. To understand the new religious landscape, we must be willing to look at much less institutional forms of religious expression. This is, in part, driven by a time in which the American people have lost their trust in institutions and when millennials show a particular generational energy for exploring and inventing new ways to pursue meaning outside of institutions.

There are two ideas and insights that can help make the connections. One is the notion of "desire paths," the other is "unbundling."

Desire Paths

The idea of a desire path comes from landscape architecture and refers to unplanned paths or trails as people develop their own routes for where they want to go. These are the familiar trampled paths in the grass found in parks and on school and college campuses where grass has given way to the dirt path that develops when person after person takes the shortcut they prefer for getting from point A to point B. The original planners had a purposeful design in mind when they laid out the sidewalks – and no doubt the original

design served the purpose and the aesthetics of the institution of which the campus or park was a part. But desire paths are developed because people are not seeking to serve the institution but rather are looking for the path that will serve their own need and purpose.

In her use of the metaphor of desire paths Sue Phillips connects them to the religious searching people are currently doing. She writes:

> Even when these new routes wreak havoc, they can teach planners where people want to go and how they want to get there. The makers of official paths can complain all they want about the unauthorized routes, but they can't deny that's where the trampled dirt is.
>
> Seeking people are trampling a lot of dirt these days.
>
> There is no evidence that people's fundamental soul needs have changed. If anything, collective awareness about the importance of belonging, mental health, and connection to deeper meaning is growing, and the democratization of access has hugely expanded available spiritual and religious content. It turns out folk still want to visit landscapes of religious and spiritual wisdom. They simply aren't following the same paths.[23]

It isn't just that established voluntary association congregations no longer provide a suitable organizational form that is attractive to people. Beyond the organizational issues that no longer accommodate changed values and lifestyles are the issues of institutions that have proven themselves untrustworthy and the issues of a digital world that continues to bend learning, communication, relationships, and community into forms not practiced by older institutions.

Desire paths help us to understand that the level and amount of experimentation and invention currently underway is not just a move away from organized religion but also an energized search toward meaning. The search may not follow the sidewalks laid down by earlier generations and by the traditional institutional church. But it is purposeful. Like all desire paths – it is going somewhere. Being able to place desire paths on the terrain of the

new religious landscape is critical in making connections to help understand how faith is being transformed in the pursuit of meaning.

Unbundling

For the second necessary idea we will follow the discoveries of Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile who began their work as students at Harvard Divinity School understanding how and where religiously unaffiliated millennials were finding meaningful community. Importantly, as they searched for the new ways in which people looked for organizations that provided community, they, as millennials, understood "unbundling" which they describe as:

> …the process of separating elements of value from a single collection of offerings. Think of a local newspaper. Whereas fifty years ago it provided classifieds, personal ads, letters to the editor, a puzzle for your commute, and, of course, the actual news, today its competitors have surpassed it in each of these, making the daily paper all but obsolete. Craigslist, Tinder, Facebook, HQTrivia, and cable news offer more personalization, deeper engagement, and perfect immediacy. The newspaper has been unbundled, and end users mix together their own preferred set of services.
>
> The same is true for meaning-making. Fifty years ago most people in the United States relied on a single religious community to conduct spiritual practices, ritualize life moments, foster healing, connect to lineage, inspire morality, house transcendent experience, mark holidays, support family, serve the needy, work for justice, and – through art, song, text, and speech – tell and retell a common story to bind them together. Now we might rely on the Insight Meditation Timer, mountain bikes, Afro-Flow Yoga, Instagram hashtags, Friday shabbatlucks, Beyonce anthems, and protesting the Muslim Ban.[24]

As Thurston and ter Kuile followed and learned about the organizations that were attracting millennials they recognized six recurring themes being lived out by these organizations in an unbundled way. In an unbundled way – meaning that all six of the themes were not found in each organization but that participants were using these organizations as they remixed their own steps toward meaning making. The six themes are:

- Community – valuing and fostering deep relationships that center on service to others.
- Personal transformation – making a conscious and dedicated effort to develop one's own body, mind, and spirit.
- Social transformation - pursuing justice and beauty in the world through the creation of networks for good.
- Purpose finding – clarifying, articulating and acting on one's personal mission in life.
- Creativity – allowing time and space to activate the imagination and engage in play.
- Accountability – holding oneself and others responsible for working toward defined goals.[25]

In following these themes, millennials (and increasingly other generations as well) are seeking and constructing their own spiritual experiences. Those experiences do not at all conform to any of the world's great religious traditions, which makes it more difficult to place them on a map of the religious landscape. Rather than an integrated world faith, the remix made from unbundled themes is part of a process that Tara Isabella Burton would recognize as "decoupled from institutions, from creeds, from metaphysical truth-claims about God or the universe or the Way Things Are, but that still seeks – in various and varying ways – to provide us with the pillars of what religion always has: meaning, purpose, community, ritual."[26] The organizations being used by millennials and others represent what Thurston and ter Kuile describe as "a paradigmatic shift from an institution to a personal understanding of spirituality."[27] As such, these organizations offer the context

and opportunity for individuals to construct custom-made, "bespoke," understandings of meaning – and perhaps even faith. Offered are fellowship, personal reflection, pilgrimage, aesthetic discipline, and a host of other benefits and practices that support the meaning-making efforts of the individuals who do their seeking outside of traditional established institutions.

Allowing for desire paths and unbundling there is certainly an uncountable number of organizations that can be placed on the new map, which would easily become unreadably cluttered with all the findings. At this point I will locate only a very few place-holding examples that Thurston and ter Kuile have found, using them as markers for the many, many other organizations being used for meaning-making. Our short list which can be found as additions on Figure 3 include:

- **The Dinner Party** – communities of 20- and 30-somethings who all have experienced a significant loss, and who get together over homemade food to talk about it and how it impacts their lives. (addresses the themes of personal transformation and community)
- **CrossFit** – a fitness franchise business which aims to forge a broad, general fitness defined as increased work capacity across broad time and modal domains using a team approach. (addresses the themes of community, personal transformation, and accountability)
- **Soulcycle** – a spin class franchise business where fitness is associated with empowerment, joyful living, and both inner and outer strength. (addresses the themes of community, personal transformation, and creativity)
- **U.S. Department of Arts and Culture (USDAC)** – an action network of artists and cultural workers mobilizing creativity in the service of social justice. The name is a play on the fact that the United States doesn't have a Department of Arts and Culture. (addresses the themes of community, social transformation, and creativity)

- **Millennial Trains Project (MTP)** – crowd-funded train journeys across America for diverse groups of young innovators for personal development and mentor-led seminars and participant-led projects. (addresses the themes of personal transformation, purpose finding, and accountability)

As we continue, we will see that these individualized efforts of meaning-making are increasingly disembedded the nearer that they move toward the free form organizational pole. They ask less of belonging, membership, shared identity, continued volunteer involvement, or sustained financial support. This disembedded experience will be particularly exposed as we move into a second version of invisibility – this time a non-congregational invisibility.

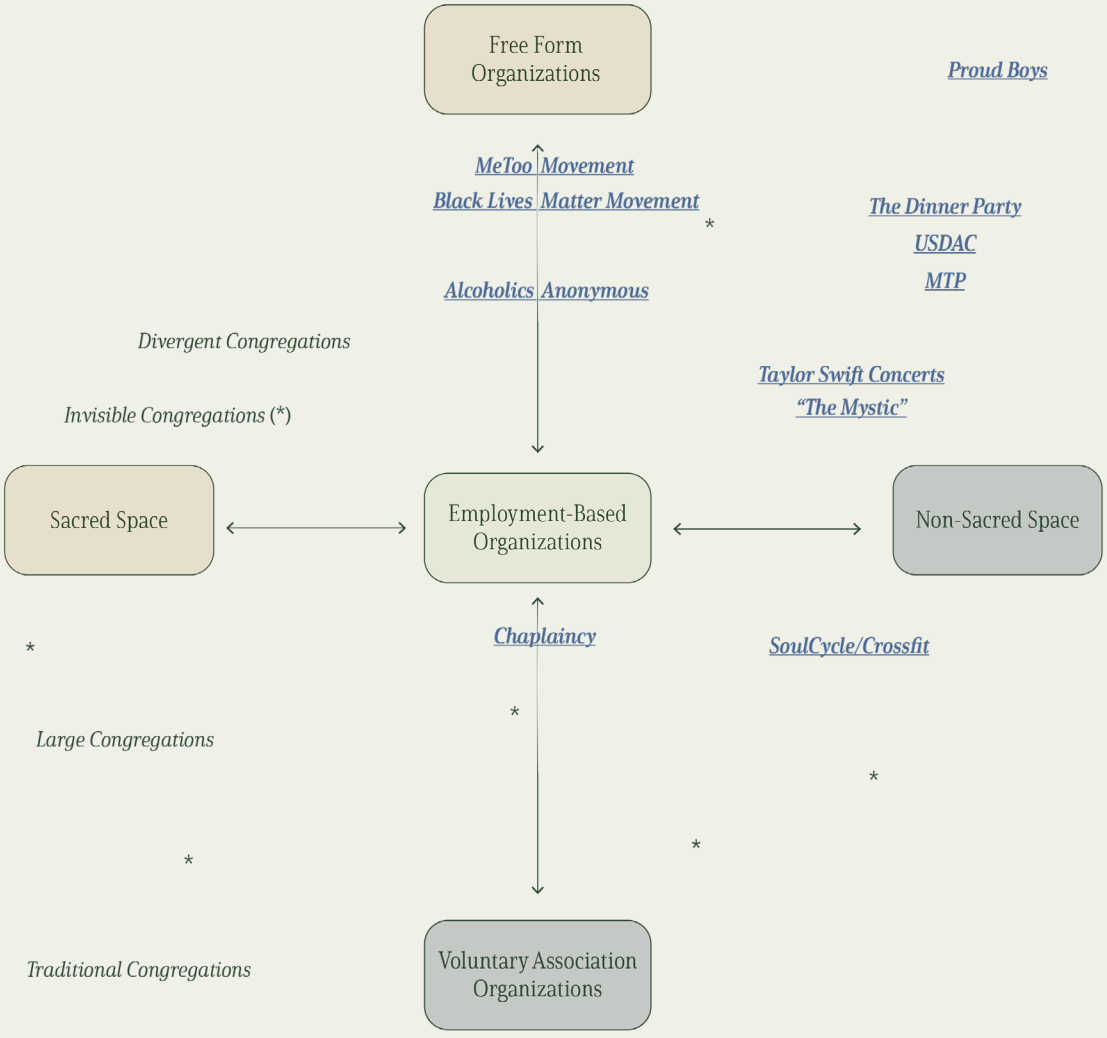

Figure 3: Unbundled Desire Paths

Invisibility Continued

Earlier I reported on the work of Melton, Ferguson, and Foertsch who identified actual organized congregations that were "invisible" – flying under the radar of the Religious Congregations and Membership Survey and thus skipped in the overall count of the number of congregations in the United States. In this section of "non-congregational invisibility" we will note additional vehicles of identity, purpose, meaning, and faith that also populate the new religious landscape. As fully bespoke efforts which individuals use in constructing their lives, these examples also provide somewhat of a congregate experience of identity and belonging. Yet their congregate purpose operates invisibly behind their stated purposes.

The Movements

A movement is a group of people engaged in a series of activities working toward an objective. As we will quickly see, movements can be organized in a variety of ways. To qualify for a place on the new landscape a movement's objective – the difference it seeks to make, the injustice it seeks to correct – must be of meaning making quality. Is it based on a conviction of how the world works, or should work? Does it offer a way (a mindset, disciplines, behaviors) for how a person should live in that world? Does it bring people together in a supporting community and provide rituals and practices to support its participants?

So as not to overlook the obvious, the first placement of a movement on the map are the 12-step programs. There are over 30 12-step programs of which Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) is the oldest and most recognizable. A.A. will be located on the map as the standard bearer for the full range of these movement / programs.

The primary purpose of A.A. is to help alcoholics achieve sobriety. The 12 Steps, 12 Traditions, and 12 Concepts of A.A. describe a world that is both lifegiving and possible for its participants. The organization has an estimated 2 million participants in over 180 countries attending one or more of the over 120,000 meetings held each week. A friend

described his participation in A.A. as not only a life-saver, but also the major meaning making, spiritually-based experience of his life.

A.A. finds its place on the map half-way between sacred and non-sacred space. Often meeting in the building space of congregations (an appropriate use of sacred space) A.A. is non-creedal, inviting participants to connect with a "Power greater than oneself" that can return the individual back to a life of sanity that is without addiction dependence. So, it lives clearly anchored in that middle space between sacred and non-sacred, recognizing a transcendent power, yet experienced in the very non-sacred space of daily living with the realities of the imminent.

Organizationally A.A. lives in the upper half of the landscape. There is an employment-based General Service Office located in New York City which cares for central administration, resources, literature and support. So, A.A. is not without a central, employment-based structure. But the fundamental unit of A.A. is the local group which is defined as "any gathering of two or more alcoholics who wish to recover and have no other affliction."[28] Volunteer based with local leadership, A.A. as a movement strongly embraces the disembedded nature described earlier. Membership in A.A. is described as "open to all who have a desire to recover from alcoholism. There are no dues, fees, requirements or restrictions of any kind. There is no formal application to join a group." A.A. lives in its assigned space on the map because of the clear meaning making purpose it offers for participants, its work that lies within the tension between the sacred and non-sacred within our lives, and its minimal organizational structure that depends on the freedom of a fully disembedded connection with its participants.

Moving further into the consideration of the role of movements, perhaps the least structured and most disembodied expressions of meaning-making can be found in the social justice movements that live midway between the sacred space in which justice can be found in text, tradition, and organized efforts on the one hand, and in the purely non-sacred space of political action and policy making on the other.

In the middle of our new map at the top of the free form organizational style are examples of the **MeToo Movement** and the **Black Lives Matter** movement. MeToo is a

social movement and awareness campaign against sexual abuse, sexual harassment and rape culture. It began in 2006 on social media by activist Tarana Burke and after 2017 the hashtag #MeToo was being used by millions of people with MeToo spreading to dozens of languages within and beyond the United States. Along with its life on the Internet the MeToo movement spawned protest gatherings seeking to influence political responses.

Similarly, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is a political and social movement that highlights racism, discrimination, and racial inequality experienced by Black people. It began in response to the killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Rekia Boyd. In 2013 the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter appeared on social media, by 2014 there were street demonstrations, and in 2020 in response to the murder of George Floyd the protests went global. An estimated 15 to 26 million people participated in BLM protests in the United States alone.

Such movements are organizationally highly decentralized and free form in structure. Participants are highly disembedded – free to come, free to go, choosing to be highly visible and active or choosing to lurk, invisible to other participants. DeRay McKesson, an activist in the BLM movement, described the movement as one that "encourages all who publicly declare that Black lives matter and devote their time and energy accordingly."[29] This is a disembedded level of connection far removed from the formal vows of the traditional congregational voluntary association. Nonetheless, such highly public social justice movements have a place on the new religious landscape because they also provide an unbundled opportunity for individuals to frame meaning for their lives. There is (1) a narrative of the world and how it works, (2) a purpose that shapes personal behavior, (3) community (even if only on the Internet where faces and names might not be shared), and (4) there is symbol, ritual, and tradition quickly constructed.

Beyond such social justice movements as the two examples above, the map would be incomplete without other movements such as the **Taylor Swift Eras Tour** that began in Arizona in March 2023, ended in Vancouver, British Columbia in December 2024, and spanned 149 shows across 5 continents. The tour earned over $2 billion dollars in revenue, had people flying across the globe in search of tickets, and involved multiple millions of

people – both in attendance at the concerts and as fan followers. The Eras Tour was a highly-organized business-based movement so requires a different place on the map being populated here. It was also short-lived, reminding us that entries on the new religious landscape can be long-lived spanning decades or centuries, or they can be experimental, time-limited, or even transitory and ephemeral. Yet in an unbundled world, the Eras Tour provided a very large group of people with a shared identity, community, and a sense of awe that comes from seeing oneself involved in something so much larger than the self. Even if fleeting, posting such a movement on the developing map help shapes a landscape that stretches beyond the traditional congregation and organized religion.

For similar reasons it is important not to leave the **Proud Boys** off the developing map. Earlier I offered the argument that changing the lens from congregations to a Durkheimian meaning-making allows for a fuller and more helpful mapping, but that the changed lens could also allow for moving beyond (or fall far short of) a search for the transcendent. Unbundled remixing is not the usual search for God found in the Great Religions. So, the Proud Boys, in its free form organizational space, is an unbundled expression in very non-sacred (some might say anti-sacred) space. It too is a search for meaning-making within the Atavist community providing participants with meaning, purpose, community and ritual focused on the immanent, as opposed to the transcendent. Clearly for some, Atavism and the Proud Boys is a civil religion encompassing their lives.[30] The lesson here is that what can be found within the chaos of the new map of the religious landscape might be a full or re-mixed partial religion, it might be long-lived or ephemeral, healthy or dangerous.

Invisibility Hidden in Corporations

Also to be located on the new map are the religious services, spiritual counseling, and **chaplaincy** located within some corporations, educational institutions, and medical health organizations. Chaplains are currently among the most engaged religious professionals, serving one in four Americans in a variety of venues.[31] Hospitals and educational institutions employ chaplains to be present and available for both workers and clients (or patients) who are suddenly faced with a life issue or relational problems. As people have moved

away from organized religion their needs that were once addressed by congregations are not necessarily met in the great unbundling. In response hospitals, schools, the military, and a growing number of for-profit corporations have brought the services of religious professionals inhouse. People who are no longer connected to traditional congregations quite naturally take their needs with them to chaplains, wherever they find them. Not surprisingly, a friend who is an ordained clergy working as an executive in a non-profit organization tells of his experience serving as the "appointed" chaplain to his whisky and cigar social club. Fifty or so men gather monthly in this club for tastings and conversation. At some point, my friend tells, he simply moves to the side of the room and stands alone. Quietly an individual, or two or three in turn, will visit him to talk about a question, problem, or issue that they are facing. My friend's whisky and cigar club may not rank a place on the new map, but corporate, educational, military, and health care chaplaincies operate similarly in non-sacred space on the map. While relatively invisible outside of those employment-based organizations, chaplaincy is increasing in importance as a religious outlet for people's meaning-making.

Similarly, locating chaplaincy on the map in its appropriate place gives recognition to another function that has been diminished in the shifting cultural values and the move away from organized religion. Chaplaincy is a means by which employment-based organizations seek to replace the voice of morality that has effectively been muted by a culture focused on the individual to the detriment of the common good. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks recounts that every civilization has been built on three institutional systems. [32] The System of The State uses its institutions to gather and use power for its ends. The System of The Economy uses its institutions to gather and use wealth for its end. Each of these systems is competitive and operates within win / lose assumptions and practices. Neither of the systems naturally attends to the common good or the larger community. The common good, the neighbor, the community, are all provinces of the third system – the System of Morality, of which the traditional congregation was once one of the foundational pillars. As the culture has changed, as the move away from organized religion has progressed, chaplaincy has taken on a new role on the religious landscape. Hospitals, colleges and universities, and corporations now not only employ chaplains to serve their workers and clients. Increasingly chaplains

sit on faculty committees, leadership teams, and in human resource offices where there is a need to hear the voice of morality and the common good as decisions are made and policy set. Still invisible in a culture that uses the lens of organized religion, chaplaincy has its substantive place on the map.

And then there is "**The Mystic.**" This example belongs on our developing map because it is an outgrowth of chaplaincy and the search for meaning-making. "The Mystic" is an example of an unbundled remix that takes on another of the forms of an invisible congregation. "The Mystic" is part of the non-profit corporation known as Church Health in Memphis, TN.[33] Church Health is a faith-based, health care, not-for-profit organization providing the highest quality health care available to Memphians who are employed but without health care insurance. Together with its partners, volunteers, and donors, Church Health provides an average of 60,000 patient visits each year to a group of people that would otherwise be shut out of health care. On the first Tuesday of each month "The Mystic" is a gathering (in-person and on the Web) of people seeking story, conversation, and music attached to hope and creativity such as evidenced in the work of Church Health. This invisible congregation is led by Dr. Scott Morris, founder and CEO of Church Health (a physician and an ordained United Methodist clergy), by Joshua Narcisse, Spiritual Care Director (chaplain) at Church Health, by Kirk Whalum, jazz saxophonist and recording artist, along with pastoral and rabbinic guests from the community. Far from the traditional voluntary association congregation, and from the sacred space of organized religion, "The Mystic" is an important place-holder on the map for the amazing array of creative "invisible congregations" that take on such a wide range of forms within an equally wide range of contexts.

POPULATING THE TERRAIN: PART 3

The Entrepreneurs

This third level of populating the new map of the religious landscape surfaces more of what is largely invisible when restricted to denominational and sociological lists and surveys of congregations. Yet, this third level is clearly faith based and spirit driven. I am referring to a growing swell of quasi-congregational meaning making ventures being created, led, and developed by entrepreneurial leaders.

Consider what has been described so far in this monograph. Traditional congregations, as stand-alone entities, are culturally out of step and are not sustainable if limited to membership giving as the major source of voluntarism and revenue. Denominations, because of their own polity resting on assumptions of the centrality of the traditional congregation (i.e., its nature, structure, size, and dependence on fulltime clergy with health and retirement benefits) are impeded from experimentation very far beyond the traditional congregational model. The safety, security, and steadiness that congregations and clergy once experienced by living within the polity and practices of a denomination have now become a constraint that limits the necessary connection of congregations to a very fluid and chaotic culture.

One result of the ferment of needs and opportunities that surface in a chaotic cultural moment, and the inability of established congregations and denominations to respond, is a bubbling up of individual entrepreneurs. The incredible energy found around these individual entrepreneurs may be further evidence of a creative chaos in search of a new self-ordered cosmos. These are individuals who rely on clarity of purpose, personal creativity, resourcefulness, and friendships and relationships to bring about that which is new and needed. By definition, entrepreneurs willingly assume the risk that comes from operating outside (or even partially outside) of denominational security. Stepping outside of denominational rules and protections puts the entrepreneurs in a position much more related to, and dependent on, their connection to the immediate neighborhood and the people who share their commitment to their purpose.

Again, consider what has already been described in this monograph. In Part I of the new religious terrain "divergent congregations" were identified as a particular form of a congregation that found a way to thrive by becoming participants in their own neighborhood. Similarly, it seems as if entrepreneurial religious leaders have a way to shift the center of their gravitational anchor away from the denomination and locate it within the neighborhood, or a specific and particular audience, to which they commit themselves.

"...entrepreneurial religious leaders have a way to shift the center of their gravitational anchor away from the denomination and locate it within the neighborhood, or a specific and particular audience..."

The story of The Locke Innovative Leaders, named after retired Texas Methodist Foundation (TMF) president Tom Locke, may offer a case in point to describe this new addition to the religious landscape. The Locke Innovative Leaders project is part of the (TMF) and the Wesleyan Impact Partners (WI), two sister United Methodist organizations that are historically and missionally connected to resourcing and empowering both congregations and clergy. In the development of their own work TMF / WI arrived at a conviction that, along with supporting congregations and clergy, creative and experimental ministries with a cultural fitness could be encouraged and supported by directing attention and resources to individuals (i.e., religious social entrepreneurs) rather than to denominational programs and projects. They discovered that investing in individual entrepreneurs would lead them to ministries that could not live within a denomination but could thrive on the new landscape.

Curiously this conviction was initially limited by the reality that TMF /WI had worked so long with established clergy, congregations, and denominational leaders that they, themselves, were hard pressed to know who such entrepreneurial leaders might be. With descriptions of religious entrepreneurs in hand, TMF / WI developed a national network of "nominators" who were individuals deeply involved in that part of the religious landscape where they lived and worked. Using nominations from those individuals who knew so much more about what was already happening at the local level, the Board of Directors of WI selected up to four entrepreneurial leaders per year to receive a substantial cash award and

an invitation to meet and learn from other similar entrepreneurial leaders. The WI has now completed a fifth cycle of Locke Innovative Leaders and built a learning relationship with these, previously hidden, leaders.

Blair Thompson, the Chief Learning and Innovation Officer of TMF / WI, spent sufficient time with these leaders, who she identifies as "explorers and risk takers," to offer four significant characteristics that they share:

1. they pursue that which makes them come alive.
2. they view the parish as their world (i.e., reversing the old paradigm of "the world is my parish," they direct their focus and time on a clearly defined local level of their neighborhood or clientele).
3. they take the long view, knowing that outcomes and results will not come immediately; and
4. they build their network of friends and colleagues who will support the work that they commit themselves to.[34]

The cohort of leaders who share these characteristics that TMF / WI assembled through their award program demonstrate the ability of entrepreneurial ministries to live and thrive on the new religious terrain.

I will use the examples of a few of these entrepreneurial leaders as place holders on the new map that is being built here. They are place holders in two aspects. They are place holders because, once again, there are too many such ministries already alive and thriving in the new religious landscape to allow for more than a few examples on our map. Secondly, they are place holders because they represent ministries that tend to remain hidden beyond the boundaries of the very neighborhood in which they focus their work. Not easily fitting into categories that denominations and researchers would use to compile lists of ministers and ministries there is, at best, an underground network that these entrepreneurial leaders are aware of – or, at less than best, they operate without connection or support that might make them more visible. So, consider the following placeholders as examples to be placed on our developing map.[35] (see Figure 4):

- Joe Bowling of **Englewood Community Development Corporation** in Indianapolis (a faith-driven organization that promotes comprehensive community development focused on vulnerable populations through affordable housing, job creation, economic development, and faith community support)
- Jonathan Brooks of **Lawndale Community Church** in Chicago (a multifocal neighborhood organization that includes youth, dance and music, recovery, pastoral training, a Christian health center, a legal center, and a community development association)
- Heber Brown III of the **Black Church Food Security Network** in Baltimore (a community development organization to promote food security and create abundance through the connection of churches and farmers)
- Alisha Gordon of **The Current Project** (an initiative to close the social and economic gaps for Black single mothers through digital community)
- Cote Soerens, co-owner of **Resistancia Coffee** of Seattle (a coffee house community hub bringing people and innovation together to create a more equitable neighborhood).

Religious entrepreneurial leaders often remain within a relationship with one or more established denominations. This provides theological and spiritual health for their ministries since identification with a denomination provides guard rails to keep both theological and ethical leadership within healthy bounds. But they also maintain a respectful distance from denominations so that established polity and practice do not interfere with their inventiveness in developing relationships, independence, and business models necessary to the new forms of meaning making communities within the changed culture.

Refugia Faith – The Small, Safe Places

The final occupants to be placed on the new map of the chaotic religious landscape in this monograph are the "refugia" ministries. These ministries are often less than formal organizations that nevertheless deserve a place on our developing map because they are products of, and creations for, meaning making in a chaotic time.

I am borrowing the term "refugia" from Debra Rienstra and her remarkable book about the potential of people of faith to address the growing climate crisis.[36] Rienstra uses the notion of refugia to note little pockets of safety in the midst of crisis and calamity. Using the example of the eruption of Mount Saint Helens in May of 1980, it was first thought that several human lifetimes would be needed for life to return to the apocalyptic death zone left by the volcanic eruption. Instead, within a mere forty years the mountainsides were again covered with lush grasses, growing trees, scampering animals, and flowing streams. What scientists discovered was refugia – little places that were left when mountain blasted ash and rock covered the landscape. As Rienstra writes, "Here, a bed of moss and deer fern under a rotting log. There, under a boulder, a patch of pearly everlasting and the tunnel to a mole's musty nest."[37] Life that was protected in pockets of refugia provided the seed for a renewal that would begin a thriving environment once again where chaos had brought destruction.

Similarly, our current American terrain is a place marked by destruction. To the point of our effort to remap a changed religious landscape that has been laid bare by generational changes, technological seismic shifts, and Hunter's "warring hegemonic projects" of our current culture war, it is worth giving attention to Rienstra's own reflection. She writes:

> Yet I know from the broad sweep of Scriptures, from history, and from my own experience, that God loves to work in small, humble, hidden places…, that God loves refugia. The refugia model calls for us to look for a few good things, let what is good and beautiful grow and connect and spread…. As the etymology of the term implies, refugia are places of refuge. They are places to find shelter – but only for a time. More

> importantly, refugia are places to begin, places where tender and harrowing work of reconstruction and renewal takes root.[38]

The small, safe, places that refugia provides exist in multiple, organic, and unique shapes. I see it all about me, so I will lead with personal observation. I will also assume that readers of this monograph are equally surrounded by refugia as well, and once becoming aware of the function of refugia will be able to make their own personal observation.

I see it in my Jewish neighbor's long involvement in *hevrot* where a small group of friends join a cantor weekly on Zoom for text study and discussion. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes *hevrot* as "friendly societies" noting that "during the many centuries of exile and dispersion Jewish communities (*hevrot*) were built around the needs of homelessness, food for the hungry, assistance for the poor, visiting the sick, comforting mourners."[39] *Hevrot* can also be built around the needs created by chaos. Such small friendly societies can function as a sailboat's keel, providing some traction in turbulent waters to allow for steering a path ahead.

"[Refugia] are small and safe places that exist when and where people come together to find refuge from storms and a steady place on which to stand.."

I see it in the two men's groups that I am part of – one called a "coffee," the other jokingly called a "salon." In both, the conversation blends faith along with our personal and professional experiences to find a more balanced place to stand in the midst of personal, communal, and national turbulence.

I see it in my friend Casper ter Kuile's Substack blog where he shares his search for spiritual community and invites others to respond.[40] In a culture focused on the individual and with little sense of a common good, this is the refugia of connection with others who also search for healthy, supportive community.

I remember it in the house churches of the 1960s and 1970s as I was just beginning my pastoral ministry in Philadelphia. It was a time when there was an identifiable and growing movement of small groups of people moving into one another's homes for worship.

When liturgy and prayer felt inadequate and constrained by tradition and formality, small refugia groups wrote their own liturgies, shared their own prayers, and sang their own worship in one another's living rooms.

I see it in my son's friendship group where he and his wife have gathered regularly over the years to share about their parenting, their faith, their need to express generosity, and their work lives.

All of these are personal sightings that come easily by just looking about. Refugia will not be found in denominational listings of ministries, will not seek 501(c)(3) tax status, will not submit annual reports, and will not suffer from anxiety over financial resources or deferred maintenance on buildings. They are small and safe places that exist when and where people come together to find refuge from storms and a steady place on which to stand.

And so, the small size, the invisibility, the multiplicity, and the uniqueness of refugia raises the question of how it might be mapped on the new religious terrain. To that extent refugia are more to be recognized than to be located. Too small to be placed on our map, Figure 4 now simply reminds us that in each quadrant (in every nook and cranny) healthy meaning making is quietly going about its business while chaos sweeps over the culture.

Ignoramus – (We Do Not Know): Final Notes About the New Map

A primary reason that this newly developing map of the changed religious landscape uses only a limited number of examples from each of our categories, as well as only the reminder of refugia, is that an honest new map such as being attempted here, requires a good bit of white space left over. We must leave room for what we cannot yet see, what we do not yet know. Our map can only be a snapshot of the present moment – a moment that is still on the threshold of change. Chaos is still only straining toward cosmos. So, allow me to repeat a paragraph from my book Countercultural:

> In his history of humankind Yuval Harari pointedly states that modern science is based on the Latin injunction *ignoramus* – "we do not

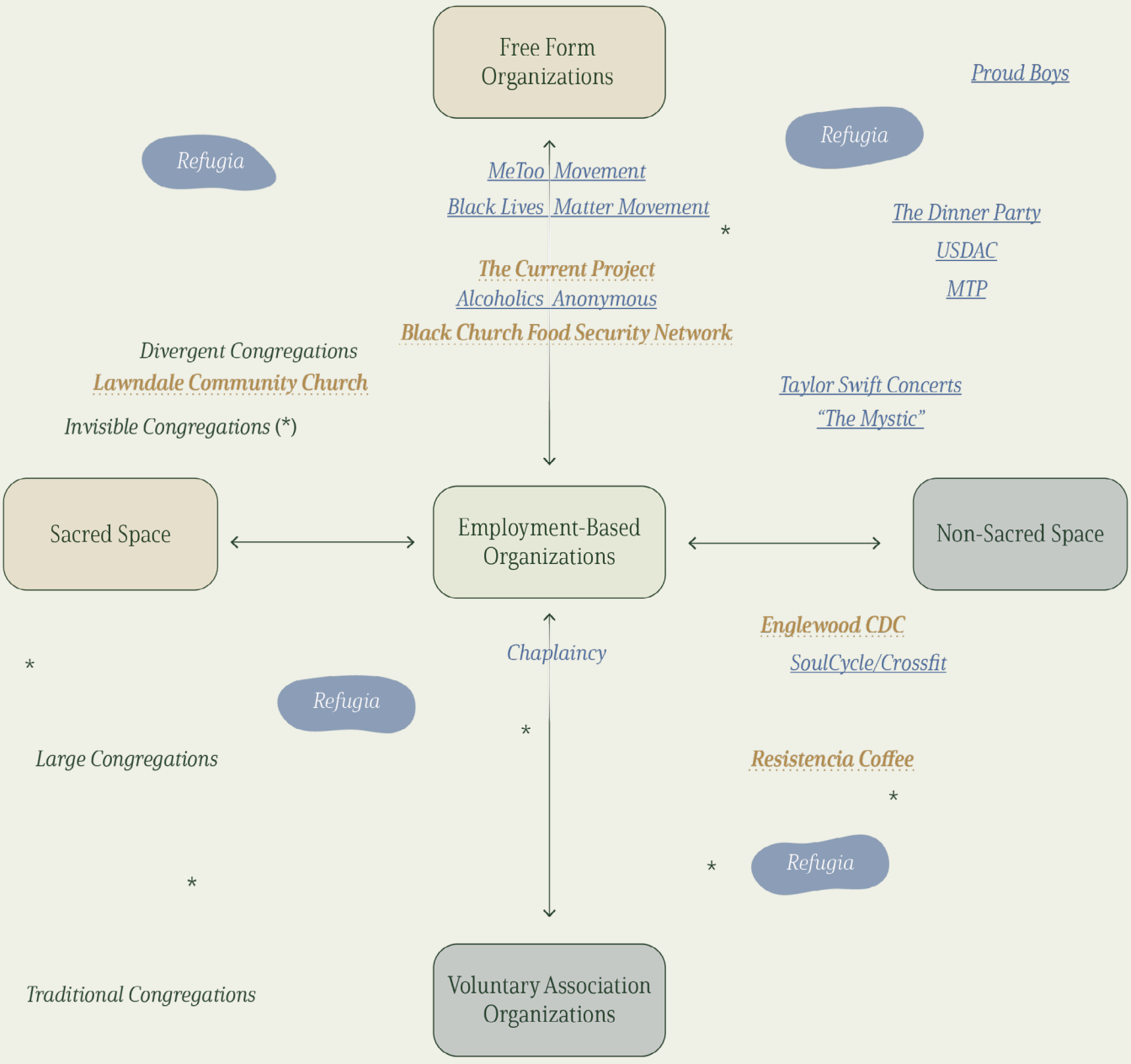

Figure 4: Entrepreneurialism and Refugia

> know." The only way to move ahead is to assume that we don't already know everything. He points out that pre-modern map makers drew complete world maps long before they were actually familiar with the entire globe. Unknown spaces were filled with the images of monsters and wonders as if map makers did know what was out there, giving the sense of a world understood. Such maps did not stir up the spirit of wonder and exploration but rather kept people at home in their known places and familiar ways out of fear of what they saw on the maps. Harari points out that it was during the 15th and 16th centuries that map makers began to draw world maps with lots of empty spaces.[41] The empty spaces were a breakthrough, an acknowledgement of what was not known – *ignoramus*. It was a turning point toward a time of exploration, beginning with Christopher Columbus sailing west from Spain in 1492 to disprove what he assumed and to discover what he didn't know.[42]

It is again a moment in which we must disprove (to ourselves) what we have far too long assumed. It is only in that way that what we don't yet know can be discovered. There is still more for us to find, to understand, and to be instructed by, in the white spaces that remain.

WHAT CAN BE SAID AT THIS JUNCTURE?

I remain convicted that any mapping of the current religious landscape can only be seen as a snapshot of a system that remains in chaos but at the threshold of change. The next stage of cosmos – the reordering of the system at a higher level that we are awaiting – will happen without our timing or our control. The same can be said of the current politics, social technology, generational shifts, and the economy of our American culture. We are at a "turning" – a culture shift much greater than the discomfort of progress or the strains of generational succession. Nonetheless, the new religious landscape offers up considerations and questions that are helpful for preparing for what is yet to come.

Established Denominations and Congregations

The first, and perhaps most pressing, lesson is that the current forms of our established congregations and denominations will not live well in the new religious landscape. Earlier the point was made that congregations that remain too closely attached to the voluntary association organizational model will more likely die out than find a way to live in the new landscape. Most denominational strategies continue to seek ways to resource, subsidize, merge, revitalize, or plant replicas of this voluntary association model. There is more experimentation and risk necessary to break beyond this singular model – and thankfully the best of our denominational leaders are taking a few new steps already. Those older, smaller, or tradition-bound established congregations that can no longer make the cultural leap to the new landscape must no longer claim priority attention or resources. Denominational leaders who live with books of polity and practice that have hundreds of pages of rules and restrictions must learn how to clarify the purpose of their denominational system and to step over the rules and restrictions that hamper that purpose. Clergy must learn that a connection to a denomination is still critical in its provision of identity, clear theological alignment, guidance, support, community, and ethical boundaries. But at the same time clergy can no longer depend upon the denomination for job security. The new religious landscape is teaching that there is a considerable number of assumptions and expectation to be unlearned in order to move ahead. This landscape is volatile and requires clear purpose and inventiveness more than it needs attention to established rules and practices.

Issues of Infrastructure

One thing that appears self-evident on the new landscape is that some new forms of meaning making will live and thrive, while other experiments and initiatives will be short lived. The refugia expressions of meaning making operate with little or no structure and will either die quickly or be the seeds of something more. But unbundled and entrepreneurial ministries are fragile as well and can easily starve as the initial entrepreneurial energy burns off. Purpose and energy are, of course, the critical factors. But also important is the

presence of infrastructure – the underlying foundation or basic framework and resources that can keep fragile ministries growing. As the new landscape seeks a reordering there are important questions to answer concerning the infrastructure needed.

When considering what infrastructure is available it is helpful to begin with that part of the religious meaning making system that we understand the best because of our present experience – the denomination. In her article that argues for an infrastructure more suitable to the new landscape, Sue Phillips begins with an exceptionally helpful listing of what denominations have provided in the past to their congregations and clergy. Denominations, she notes:

- establish and enforce creeds and statements of belief
- standardize and sacralize liturgies and rites of passage
- canonize texts, create hymn and prayer books, design education curricula
- identify and amplify elders, saints, and wisdom teachers
- commission and proliferate imagery, icons, songs, and stories
- establish and enforce community standards, accountabilities, and consequences
- authorize leaders
- financially subsidize religious life in otherwise unsustainable areas
- build website templates, marketing campaigns, and branding
- build, own, and maintain physical plants; fund the expansion and care of buildings
- credential professionals and create mechanisms for the portability of those credentials
- create professional associations for networking, continuing education, and accountability

- sponsor theological education, chaplaincy, and clinical pastoral education programs
- train lay leaders and offer leadership development programs
- support monastics and religious orders
- organize collective social justice and policy efforts
- gather member communities and leaders at local, regional, and national events[43]

While a good bit of the denominational infrastructure listed above standardizes the current institutional practice of traditional congregations at a time when ministry on the new landscape must be creative and agile, the fact remains that infrastructure is necessary to underwrite institution building in any setting. The question is what infrastructure is necessary for developing new forms of institutions of meaning making on the new landscape, and where will it be found? Surely it may include some of, but will be different from the list of denominational infrastructure above. Because denominations are restricted by their own polity from working outside their own institutional boundaries, it is unfair to assume that they have the major responsibility to provide infrastructure with meaning making ventures that don't fit into their own system.

Perhaps this is a helpful place to note the difference between a provider and a platform that I have drawn in earlier writing. A provider supplies what is needed. Providers direct the resources that they already possess in order to accomplish work that belongs to them. They provide resources, standards, and support to those parts of their own system, or related entities outside of their system, which are aligned with their own purpose. When functioning as a provider it is quite natural that both the agenda and the agency remain within the authority of the provider. Agenda refers to the reason for which a group or organization does something – i.e., to what end? And agency refers to who has the power to

"Providers direct the resources that they already possess in order to accomplish work that belongs to them."

determine what is to be accomplished – i.e., who gets to say what will be done. And, since providers must deal with the limit of the resources that they possess, they appropriately prioritize and limit with whom, and how much, and for what output, they will share their resources – all of this determined by their own agenda and goals. Denominations have historically functioned as providers in their relationship with the congregations, committees, agencies, and clergy within their own system.

A platform functions quite differently from a provider. A platform is a place where others gather to do their own work. Agenda and agency remain with the user of the platform, not with the platform itself. A primary technological example of a platform is the Apple iOS digital system used by all Apple iPhones, iPods, and iPads. The iOS platform very much belongs to the Apple corporation. When a customer buys one of the Apple products, they do not purchase the digital platform on which the product works. They cannot open up their iPhone or iPad and tinker with the software to adjust it to their ideas as an owner. They become a user of the platform that belongs to Apple. In a 2014 study of Apple iOS it was reported that, at that time, there were 365 million users (people who purchased an Apple product connecting them to the iOS platform) and over 800,000 complementary apps developed by non-Apple information and program developers that used the platform but who neither worked for, nor were controlled by, Apple.[44] The function of the iOS platform was simply to provide a place to bring together the 365 million users with the 800,000 apps. An offshoot was that not only did the iOS platform become an interface between the user and the provider, but it also became a gathering place as users found one another. A platform provides space and capacities to accomplish ends, but according to the agenda and agency which remains with the user.

"A platform is a place where others gather to do their own work."

In considering infrastructure that can be available to the unbundled, creative, and entrepreneurial initiatives that now dot the new religious landscape, it then becomes clearer why denominations are limited helpmates. As mentioned, denominations historically functioned as providers – maintaining the agenda and agency that appropriately belonged to them. But, as in so many things on the new religious landscape, there are changes here

as well. The historic role of being a provider is now limited in most denominations by their own finite (and diminishing) resources. Increasingly regional denominational offices are learning how to shift their working style to include internal platforms. No longer able to "pay" for all internal initiatives by forming committees and boards with budgets, these regional offices (conferences, dioceses, presbyteries) find themselves increasingly to be the platform on which they gather the clergy and laity within their bounds who have the energy and inventiveness to fund work in areas designated as important. While now sharing some of the agenda and agency with internal groups, the work is nonetheless within the scope of the purpose of the denomination and its regional office. Internal platforms still align themselves with the purpose and outcomes of the denomination and share much of the denomination's limits in stepping beyond traditional boundaries. But even here denominational offices are finding resources strained. Where the initial strain came from limited financial resources, the internal platform work of denominations is also limited by the diminishing energy and attention of the leaders of traditional congregations that find it difficult to work beyond the needs of their own congregations.

The unbundled, creative, and entrepreneurial initiatives that step beyond denominational boundaries still need an infrastructure that accommodates their presence on the areas of the religious landscape that are beyond the reach of denominations and traditional congregations. The more hopeful approach is the construction of new platforms where agenda and agency remain with the user (the religious entrepreneur), but where an interface with information and other users can form the beginning structure necessary to institution building and sustainability.

Perhaps a fledgling example of such a platform can be seen in the cohort of Locke Innovative Leaders identified earlier in this monograph. With some twenty or so leaders now identified through this program, the Wesleyan Impact Partners provides a regular, facilitated gathering for these individuals to learn from one another and from which to widen relationships beyond themselves. Participants continually report the importance of this cohort group in the multiple areas of learning, of spirituality, of clarity of purpose, and of networking that stems the tide of isolation and exhaustion that often overwhelms

entrepreneurial efforts. This is a starting place for learning what infrastructure is needed on the new religious landscape – and who the providers might be.

A fuller and more mature platform for leaders that works outside of religious arenas can be seen in The Plywood People, a nonprofit organization in Atlanta, Georgia, whose mission is to build a global community of social impact leaders.[45] The Plywood People is the product of well experienced social entrepreneurs and it provides learning, co-working space, event space, and podcasts to newer social entrepreneurs who are creating their own organizations and institutions. New entrepreneurs can sign on for a twelve-month zoom learning experience, can work side-by-side with others in co-working space, can use available space for their own scheduled events, and can build and broaden a network of others who can sustain them in their own work. The Plywood People provides the platform. But the way in which entrepreneurs use this platform is determined by the user. Watching how entrepreneurial leaders and their enterprises use the platforms that they find, of which the Locke Leaders and The Plywood People are only two examples, will bring further definition to the infrastructure that the new religious landscape will need for continued development.

Issues of Formation

As noted earlier, Huston Smith was a widely recognized expert on world religions authoring thirteen books on world religions, philosophy, and comparative religion. A few years before his death Smith was interviewed on National Public Radio. The interviewer asked about Smith's own religious practices. Noting that he knew so much about so many religions, she wondered if he picked and chose what he most appreciated about each and put the pieces together for himself. He responded fairly sharply, saying no – that he had devoted years of study and practice to each of the world's great religions and that they could not be pulled apart into preferred pieces. Each religion, he stated, was meant to be a disciplined way of life.

Smith's understanding of religious faith stands in direct contrast with the bespoke practices of the current generation that has learned to unbundle and remix what they seek

in their personal efforts of meaning making. It is an issue of discipline and formation. And so, it raises the question of how formation will be addressed on the new map.

Formation is a lifelong practice of nurturing and deepening one's faith. There has been a myriad of theories of how formation happens and what clergy or congregations might do to enable formation among its participants. However, even a simple overview of the concept of faith formation depends on a rather deep sense of time, practice, and community. Key aspects of formation include notions of a lifelong journey; a focus on deepening what is known; a holistic approach seeking to integrate a person's intellect, heart, and hands (head, heart, and hands); community involvement; personal transformation; and moral formation. Formation takes place in a traditional congregation through catechesis, liturgy, pastoral care, along with service and outreach. Formation runs deep in religious practice because religion seeks to "form" – it is meaning making in the fullest sense of Durkheim's construct: a complete world view, a continual discovery of how to live in that world, a community to sustain and support, as well as practices, rituals, and traditions to anchor one's life as an adherent.

"...faith formation depends on a rather deep sense of time, practice, and community."

Even such a cursory review of formation reveals an obvious tension with current practices identified in the monograph above. As early as 1985 Robert Bellah and his team of researchers introduced the notion of "Sheilaism" in his landmark book, Habits of the Heart.[46] Sheilaism was an example of a communication-based reset of religion that was self-shaped by a woman named Sheila who developed her own personal version of a religious faith into something that best suited her own comfort and needs. As such, Sheilaism was an early precursor of the generation that has learned to unbundle and remix values and practices as described in Thurston and ter Kuile's "How We Gather" work from the 2010s as noted earlier. The tension produced is one of being shaped by text, tradition, and community on the one hand and shaped by personal need, preference and perspective on the other. The subtitle of Bellah's study is "Individualism and Commitment in American Life." It is a tension born

of the swing of cultural values that increasingly tilted toward a world that met individual preferences over a communal common good and a disciplined life.[47]

The reshaping of the human mind by the Internet also raises a significant challenge to the notion of any disciplined formation of persons. In his study, Nicholas Carr demonstrated how our dependence on the Internet stands in opposition to formation.[48] As a prime example consider any entry from the Internet encyclopedia, Wikipedia. While Wikipedia provides a rather comprehensive, and continually curated, explanation of a seemingly endless number of topics, every entry also includes an unending number of embedded blue hyperlinks as a part of the text. The effect, argues Carr, is that while a person may be trying to learn something about a chosen topic, each blue hyperlink is a temptation to leave the original search by being distracted to another idea or curiosity. Learning takes on the character of leapfrogging through ideas rather than a disciplined commitment to understanding. It is all a part of an attention economy in which marketers are paid for "eyes on" – that is, for how many times people click on a link to bring them to a site that an advertiser wants them to see. The attention economy and our accommodation of limitless hyperlinks inviting us to jump to some other bit of information, as Carr explains, has rewired our brains so that fewer people can sustain practices of deep reading and critical thought. As he notes, "we become less reflective and more impulsive. Far from enhancing human intelligence…the Internet degrades it."[49] The continual and disciplined formation of an individual into a religious world view is now challenged by an audience that is trained in the reading of posts and blogs instead of books and catechisms.

The new religious landscape raises significant questions about how people will shape their lives in their chosen, or preferred, worldview. Indeed, what worldview do people choose to hold, and is it confirmed by the long hand of history or prompted by immediate experience? How will people form themselves to live in their world view, and will they sustain their attention and discipline so that their lives will find guidance and meaning? Do we still hold to the value of a maturing discipline that continually shapes and forms our lives to what we believe? Can formation be done in digital community?

There are more questions than answers.

Issues for Leadership

Religious leadership, in both formation and practice, are also challenged in the new landscape. Historically religious leadership has rested on three forms of authority. Some call on the charisma of office, the claim that spiritual power is a gift of office. There is the charisma of person in which an individual man or woman claims authority through a "call" that comes with the granting of a divine gift. The third is rational authority – a claim derived from a person's knowledge and skill to promote the aims of the church received by means of a special education that sets the minister apart from the laity.[50]

Traditionally the Catholic Church has called most heavily on the charisma of office, while Protestantism wove its historic path between the charisma of person (the spirit-called clergy) and rational authority (the educated clergy.) To this day there remains a tension among the Mainline, Evangelical, and Pentecostal expressions of Christianity over the importance of educated versus spirit-called clergy. The reality is that "clerical authority has assumed multiple forms, that it underwent continual evolution, and that its changing forms always registered the force of social location."[51] Leadership and authority in religious enterprises has always been, and continues to be, subject to its time and place.

"The reality is that clerical authority has assumed multiple forms, that it underwent continual evolution, and that its changing forms always registered the force of social location."

For example, Martin Luther posted his theses on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517. He himself claimed his authority by the charisma of office given him by the church. By 1527, only ten years later, there was growing concern about the fitness of protestant clergy to teach – a concern heightened by the expanding literacy of European laity. Luther's response was to call upon the different claim of rational authority and the requirement of education for clergy as a helpful reform.

Pushing ahead, by the late 1700s in the young and newly forming America, the professional ideal for clergy to be educated required the founding of seminaries on the East

Coast that were the first American educational institutions designed for graduate education. Yet, as important as education and the claim of rational authority was for clergy serving the towns and settled villages of the new America, education was denied to Blacks and was unavailable to the rural populace that was pushing westward from the coast. Unable to be educated, the social location of these clergy made them call upon the charisma of person. Authority evolved again given a changed social location.

In our own case, in the twentieth century in the United States, religious leadership has been highly aligned with the institutions of the church and has depended upon different levels or forms of certification – most of which depend heavily on education, or rational authority. In this particular use of the word "institution" I refer to a formal organization that is solely shaped around an identifiable truth, tradition, value, or practice that is religious. Certification might come from a seminary or school, a denominational office, a set of required experiences, or some combination of these requirements.

Most recently significant changes have developed from the changed social location of these organizations as all institutions in America are strained from a lack of trust and importance. Culturally the dominant values and attention in the United States have shifted away from the group and the common good (the "WE" of the 1920s to mid1960s) to the individual (the "I" of the mid1960s to the present).[52] Generally all institutions are valued and experience high levels of trust in "WE" times when there is a strong cultural consensus. In contrast, during the noncohesive times of an "I" culture, institutions are neither trusted nor valued. This has strongly influenced people's attention and use of established congregations as described earlier in this monograph. It has also impacted the seminaries and certification paths for people seeking leadership roles in religious enterprises. The percentage of those people attending seminaries with the intended purpose of being a pastor in a Mainline protestant congregation began to slip in the 1960s. Increasingly those who

"Increasingly those who were attending theological seminaries might not have been seeking certification for an institutional leadership position but were seeking self-development for their own personal path of meaning making."

were attending theological seminaries might not have been seeking certification for an institutional leadership position but were seeking self-development for their own personal path of meaning making. The unbundling and remixing of the last few decades have sent some off to theological seminaries to prepare for their personal entrepreneurial pursuit of meaning making in non-congregational forms. For others, their entrepreneurial leadership in meaning making pursuits has led them to seminaries, or continuing education, or to learning communities, to undergird the leadership they are already exercising.

A friend, Charles Senteio, points to the difference between helping someone become certified for a desired role and helping someone make a transition.[53] Senteio teaches in the Department of Library and Information Services at Rutgers University and was reflecting on his own experience. Certification depends upon completing educational and experiential requirements. In Mainline protestant denominations, certification is a 7-to-9-year process involving college, seminary, and denominational supervision that will lead to credentials for ordained ministry. In contrast Senteio notes that there is a growing number of others who, in our less-institutional time, are not interested in certification but are seeking what is needed for transition. Their question is how they can get from point A to point B in their lives. An example comes from another friend Alfred Johnson, a teacher in a theological seminary who tells of a pediatric physician who, as she retires, has taken up theological classes in preparation for her next step. She has long been a religious person and a spiritual seeker and feels clearly that her next step, post-retirement, will be given to leadership in a religious enterprise. Her interest is not in investing years and dollars to gain certification. She is seeking direction and assurance. She wants to know that she is leading and teaching within the guardrails of her religious tradition and she wants to feel secure that her leadership is both helpful and healthy. Pediatrics is her point A. She is transitioning to spiritual leadership as point B. She is not seeking certification; she is transitioning and seeks only to be responsible and to lead with assurance.

If clerical authority is malleable in response to the forces of social location, so must the paths to that clerical authority be malleable as well. An increasing number of seminaries across the country which have as their central purpose to provide a denominational path for certification to lead traditional congregations are now stressed. The dwindling number

of established congregations of a size able to employ newly certified clergy is now a part of that social location. The explosion of new and less institutional enterprises of meaning making that are now appearing on the map of the religious landscape that is explored in this monograph is now a part of that social location.

Denominations are straining to break free of the restrictions of their own making which limit them to pursue their own purpose primarily through voluntary association congregations. Many seminaries are seeking among a limited number of paths to be one of the remaining few to serve the need of certification, or to simply strain against closing, or to experiment entrepreneurially for new teaching and business models that will position them to work with students on both certification and transition needs. An early example of an entrepreneurial response is Northwind Theological Seminary. Their mission is to be an ecumenical, online seminary, with roots in the Wesleyan tradition. Their approach is to be accessible and affordable, offering online quality theological education "to local pastors, bivocational and second career clergy, and lifelong learners for faithful and creative ministry in the NeXtChurch."[54] Northwind is accredited through its relationship with Kairos University which has its own innovative, entrepreneurial approach to preparation for leadership.[55] To survive in the new social location, to serve the new religious landscape being mapped here, Northwind is experimenting with an organizational model that uses no campus, requires an exceptionally minimal overhead for operation, depends on a faculty of persons with Masters and Doctoral degrees who work on a revenue share basis, and offers flexible, affordable courses and requirements that accommodate the lifestyles and needs of students in transition.

Following the theme of this monograph, religious leadership, along with the preparation for such leadership, is caught in the chaos that is not yet reordered into any stability of a new cosmos.

Issues of Identity – Syncretism and Heresy

In the last section we saw how social location influenced the source of authority that religious leaders claim. A similar argument can be made about religious identity which is

also influenced by the time and place of social location. When it comes to understanding one's religious involvement, time and place matter. What is United Methodist in New England has a different character than what is United Methodist in the Southeast or Northwest in the United States – the impact of place. What defined the Mainline Protestant denominations in the 1950s is quite different from the character of those denominations today – the impact of time. Even as new forms of religion and meaning making enterprises are finding their way on to the new religious landscape, the established religious identities that once held sway are pushing to adapt to their time and location on the meaning making map.

In fact, the very idea or identity of "Christian" now carries a wide diversity of meanings. And I will argue that if a Christian congregation, denomination, non-profit, or enterprise seeks to be an expression of Christianity on the developing religious landscape, it will be obligated to describe and define the identity and character of the Christianity it represents. The fact is that there are a number of different Christian paths competing for attention on the new landscape. This too is a product of social location. It is helpful to go back in history a bit to understand what is at issue.

Even though the national American narrative of the founding of our country is the notion that we are the product of Christians coming to a new land in search of religious freedom, the reality is more complicated than that. Our founding itself was built on a contest among various Christian traditions and identities, not all of which would have been recognized as truly Christian by the others. The time and place from which people emigrated from England made a significant difference, as did the time and place where people landed. David Hacket Fisher describes four separate migrations – all from England, each of which was Christian at their leaving England, as well as Christian in their landing in America.[56] But each different from the other.

"Our founding itself was built on a contest among various Christian traditions and identities, not all of which would have been recognized as truly Christian by the others."

From 1629 to 1640 the Puritans came from East England to form the Massachusetts Bay Colony. They brought with them a Calvinist predetermination theology in which liberty was reserved for the predetermined. Then, beginning around 1640, the English Royalist Elites emigrated from South England with their Church of England roots to settle into the Virginia area. Unlike the simpler Puritans, they brought with them their indentured servants, titles, and practices of class elitism. They practiced a hegemonic liberty which belonged to the strong and elite. With that they sought massive estates and land claims where they practiced the right to rule the less fortunate. It was a value system later consistent with the institution of racial slavery. Then around 1675 the Quakers (Society of Friends) emigrated from the North Midlands of England to settle into the Delaware Valley and the Mid-Atlantic area of the new America. Theirs was an egalitarian faith that practiced reciprocal liberty in which all were treated equally. That egalitarianism was reflected in the way in which they settled into small (equal) estates and multiple, small townships that mirrored each other. It is no accident that Pennsylvania now has more townships, counties, and subsequently more state legislators than other states given the "small but equal" values that formed their governance at the beginning. They were sufficiently different from other English immigrant groups that they were actively anti Royalist. The fourth migration from England that took place over some 60 years in the mid 1700s came from the northern borderlands between England and Ireland. These were a people who knew constant vigilance and warfare necessary to protect their northern border from invaders where they lived in a hostile environment that was tempered by evangelical Christianity. They settled into Western Pennsylvania and the Appalachian area through Kentucky and Tennessee where they practiced a liberty that was claimed and kept by power and wealth. The value of warfare traveled with them from England to settle in as a warlike behavior in the new land, as attested to many years later by the Hatfields and McCoys.

All Christian from where they came, but all different from one another in the new land. Their social location, carried with them, marked the contesting values and practices in their new land as they expressed themselves politically. So that 100 years later Abraham Lincoln was clear about multiple notions of freedom which were still at work. Speaking in Baltimore in 1864, he said:

> The world has never had a good definition of the world liberty…. We all declare for liberty but in using the same word we do not mean the same thing…. With some the word liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself, and the product of his labor; while with others the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men, and the product of other men's labor.[57]

The differences in Christian practices and values that originated in England and settled into the new America were a mix of faith, life experience, and politics that were later tested in Lincoln's day, and which remain in our own time as the contest between Federal Authority and State's Rights. But from the very beginning in America there were different and competing paths of Christianity to follow.

The infusion of political worldviews into people's understanding and practice of their faith (and vice-versa) is not new, but rather a standard of social location. People have always used their faith in search of meaning in the Durkheimian sense of understanding how the world works – and then, how the individual should behave in such a world. To claim to be Christian is one thing – but it now requires one to describe and define the Christianity that is espoused. If needing to choose which Christianity was true at the time of our founding, it is especially true on the new emerging religious landscape of the present moment.

It is important to take another step to bring the influence of social location closer to our own time for the mapping of the current religious landscape. James Davison Hunter was among the first to note that the distinctions and differences that once separated American religious denominations were shifting.[58] Those differences in theology and practice that were once seen to be <u>between</u> denominations had migrated to live <u>within</u> denominations. This was so particularly among the Mainline Protestant denominations. By the mid 20th century, a homogeneity had settled in among those denominations because of their shared American experience and the constant mobility of the people who would as easily change their denominational affiliation as they changed their residence while moving about. From the outside, the differences that were once seen between different Mainline

denominations had largely disappeared resulting in people who rather easily changed their denominational identities.

But those inside of those denominations increasingly sensed the clear competition of theologies and practices that were growing within their denomination, which often centered on issues of biblical interpretation of Scripture, particularly as those interpretations informed cultural issues of sexual identity and behavior. Importantly, those internal differences mirrored the overall American political tension as denominational congregations increasingly took on the character of the community and region where they were located. National denominations came to experience the political tensions that were reflected by the differences within their own congregations – differences that reflected the liberality or conservativeness of their own regions. Denominational schism over these internal tensions followed by the end of the 20th century: the United Church of Christ in 1998; the Evangelical Lutheran Church by 2001; the Presbyterian Church by 2015; the United Methodist Church by 2019. It was as if the smaller national denominations went through their schisms first, followed by a on-going series of ever larger denominations, until in 2019 the United Methodist Church divided because, even at its large size, the denomination could no longer contain the tension within. In the case of United Methodism, the regional pattern of congregations remaining in the mother denomination and the disaffiliating congregations that were leaving the mother denomination largely reflected national patterns of political liberality and conservatism. Social location had influenced the theology and changed the practice of Christianity so that it came to matter "what kind" of Christianity a congregation or a person sought to practice.

So, we finally enter into the consideration of syncretism and heresy. Christian enterprises on the developing map of the chaotic religious / meaning making landscape must now identify themselves by what form of Christianity they claim to follow and what practice they espouse. In earlier decades a fundamental distinction within American Christianity could be drawn between Mainline and Evangelical. While the differences among these two expressions of Christianity were always more nuanced than allowed in a simple binary contrast, what has entered the new landscape is the fuller intertwining, and

therefore confusion, of religious and political worldviews. The narratives of meaning making are now multiple and quite different. Of particular note is the rise of Christian Nationalism.

Those who watch the development of Christian Nationalism most closely are clear that it is not a religious creed but rather a political ideology.[59] Politics has rediscovered the power of using religion and meaning making to its own advantage.

Nationalism, by itself, elevates one nation above all others and promotes that nation's culture and purpose over others. Christian Nationalism in the United States promotes the myth that this nation was founded to be a Christian nation. It is a fictionalized narrative easily punctured by the interwoven confusion and complexity of the various Christian ideals and practices that came from England and landed in America in its formative years as described above. It is punctured by the story of the expansion of the nation which fitfully, but eventually, welcomed and incorporated all of the world's Great Religions over time. Nonetheless, the persistence and the utility of the current strain of Christian Nationalism challenges any and all who operate on the new religious landscape to define and clarifying what "Christianity" they claim and practice.

Syncretism is the combination, the bringing together, of different forms of belief or practice. Syncretism is commonly experienced as a religion enters into a new geography or expands to a different people. It is the bending and shifting of a faith system (theology and practice) in order to help it fit a people who have different life experiences and histories. For example, Christianity in some areas of Africa melded with the ancestor worship of people there in order to make itself known. Currently in the United States there is an established effort to entwine Christianity with political values and goals. For many within the evangelical tradition this is received as a helpful act of syncretism enabling them to make sense of their confusing world through their faith. As Stewart notes:

"[Syncretism] is the bending and shifting of a faith system (theology and practice) in order to help it fit a people who have different life experiences and histories."

> The rank and file come to the movement with a variety of concerns including questions about life's deeper meaning, a love and appreciation of God and Scripture, ethical and family solidarity, the hope of community and friendship, and a desire to mark life's most significant passages or express feelings of joy and sorrow. They also come with a longing for certainty in an uncertain world.[60]

This is Durkheimian meaning making at work for people whose social location or choice of newsfeed has given them a picture of the world that can be described and navigated using what they know of their nationalized faith. One may or may not agree with the theology and practice of Christian Nationalism, but it is Durkheimian meaning making and now holds a place on the new religious landscape.

However, syncretism can step over the line to become heresy. Where syncretism seeks to blend, heresy seeks to overthrow. Heresy is the adherence to a religious opinion that is contrary to established dogma. No longer a politicized religion, Christian Nationalism has in some forms morphed fully into a heresy with political purpose. No longer about meaning making, its focus is power and authority.

Matthew Taylor offers an in-depth expose of The New Apostolic Reformation which is at the center of the current political contest over power and rights in the United States.[61] The New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) is a charismatic, nondenominational movement which means that it looks to the authority of spiritual charisma rather than theology or creed for its meaning making. Its nondenominational freedom means that it operates free of the guardrails of any authoritative guidance from outside of itself that might restrain it in theology, practice, or ethical behavior of leaders. It is heretical in its claim that America was not only founded by Christians, but for Christians. Theirs is a dominion theology which centers on an authoritative relationship between God and man (Genesis 1:28 – God gave human beings dominion over creation.)[62] The NAR strategy is to engage in spiritual warfare with the purpose of capturing The Seven Mountains – the seven spheres of influence needed to establish dominion (the home; the church; the schools; government and politics; the media; art, entertainment and sports; commerce, science and technology).[63] Donald

Trump, as one who they see as already conquering the mountains of commerce, media and, government, is their King Cyrus (Isaiah 45) – one who does not know God but has been given to them by God to accomplish promised ends. Far beyond meaning making, this is a full-blown heresy using its chosen bits of Christian text and tradition for political autocratic ends.

In his analysis of this American movement which has been building over the last half century Taylor makes a key observation critical to understanding the new religious landscape being mapped here:

> The deinstitutionalization of Christianity has created a marketplace that rewards entrepreneurs and shrewd leaders who know how to corner their niche.[64]

The new social location on the developing American religious landscape is one of competing, syncretized, and heretical claims. For the traditional congregations sequestered in the lower left quadrant of the new map it is no longer sufficient to be traditional in theology and denominational in connection. In a spiritual-but-not-religious, unbundled world with syncretic and heretical claims, the traditional Christian and denominational identities are little known and hold little weight. Any Christian enterprise that now wants to claim space on the new religious map must now describe and define its Christianity. With multiple and competing narratives now living under the guise` of Christianity, people need to know what worldview they are invited to step into.

CONCLUSION

With chaos straining for new order, the new religious landscape drawn here is now more complex and confusing than the one most of the people in the United States inherited from the generations that went before. Not only new, it is also a transient landscape that has changed, is changing, and will continue to change. Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman refers to this as a "liquid culture."[65] It is a time in which problems, once discovered, will

morph into new forms or different problems even before those who discovered the original problem are able to mount a solution to what was first seen. In the chaos of a liquid culture, any map drawn must be held loosely to accommodate what will quickly disappear, and what will come next.

This monograph is an experiment in which the lens through which the new religious landscape is viewed has been changed from a congregational view to the much larger perspective of meaning making. The change of lens reveals considerably more. It also presents new issues and considerations for leaders to address. But importantly, it is a snapshot – a picture captured in time that reveals what can be seen in a particular moment, but not what will come next.

There will be more to this story.

NOTES

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