



SACRED SPACE

Why a new spirituality is on the rise in our time-crunched world.

BY JOANA LOURENÇO

*i*t happened randomly, as these things often do. One minute I was walking through a grove of trees in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park and the next I had an encounter that I still can't make sense of, even months later. On that spring day, a stranger approached me with an outstretched hand and I offered a "Sorry" without taking much notice.

When I did see the small woman's downcast face, I had a jarring thought: A voice within me said, "You're looking into the face of God." Time seemed to stand still. I turned away for a moment, and the stranger disappeared into the crowd.

Though I was raised Catholic, I have considered myself an atheist for years, so I was shaken and disoriented by the feeling that I had peered behind some sort of mystical curtain. Maybe I'd been watching too many Biblical movies. This year has witnessed a flood of Judeo-Christian-influenced biopics, such as *Son of God*, *Noah* and *Heaven Is for Real*, the latter about a boy's life-after-death experience. And my fave new show, *The Leftovers*, is centred around an unexplainable event ▷

NELSON SIMONEAU

during which 2 percent of the world's population disappears from the earth.

So maybe it's no surprise that I had preternatural thoughts on the brain, but that day in California rattles me still—and I hadn't told a soul until now. Where do you turn when you want to talk about faith (or a lack thereof) or reflect on life's "big questions"? You're likely to get blank stares if you mention the topic of a religious experience over lunch with a colleague: "I had a mystical encounter with a random stranger in a park—pass the mustard." And there's no way I'm posting these thoughts on Twitter, for fear of coming off as embarrassingly earnest.

Canadians don't typically talk about religion: It's taboo to poke about in others' most deeply held beliefs. "There's so much cynicism today," says Gretta Vosper, a United Church minister and author of the bestseller *With or Without God*. "There's this sense that if you put yourself out there, you're going to get trounced on." And she would know. The ordained minister has faced her share of derision since "coming out" as an atheist more than a decade ago. The criticism from outside her community was fierce, but instead of firing her, her Toronto congregation offered acceptance. Today, Vosper leads a church that identifies itself as "post-theistic," which means they do things a bit differently. (Instead of a Christmas Eve service, for example, they celebrate the winter solstice.)

Vosper's story is unique, but it echoes religious trends in this country. "One in four Canadians claim to have no religion at all," says Joel Thiessen, sociologist at Ambrose University in Calgary and co-author of *The Sociology of Religion: A Canadian Perspective*. But while devotees of mainline religions are dwindling, the group of people who identify themselves as "spiritual but not religious" is on the rise. "More and more, people are cobbling together different beliefs and practices that don't tie them to a particular religion, per se," says Thiessen. To feel spiritually satisfied, people have been flocking to activities such as meditation, prayer and even exercise. (Think of the pseudo-sacred language used in SoulCycle, a candlelit stationary-cycling class that counts Oprah as a devotee.)

THERE'S A (HOLY) APP FOR THAT

Sure, there are apps that can help you find a place of worship. Too busy, though? Use your phone for a quick spiritual fix.



Prepare for penance with the handy **Confession: A Roman Catholic App**. It offers helpful prompts to examine your conscience ("Have I been involved with the occult?") and takes you through the confession ritual step by sin-purging step.



Why not celebrate holy days via mobile? **Light My Fire: A Hanukkah App** lets you choose from 18 menorahs, ranging from traditional designs to a sleek Karim Rashid number.



Feeling forgetful? **The Prayer Notebook app** sets alerts and reminders to pray and sends an email to the person for whom you're praying so they know you're sending them holy vibes.

These spiritual nomads—I count myself among them—aren't necessarily looking for a religious community. They may feel disillusioned by the faith they were raised in, or shun the dogma altogether, but they still crave what Vosper calls the "off-label benefits" of such groups. Studies show that developing friendships in a community—not necessarily a faith-based one—leads to a greater sense of well-being and better health.

This partly explains the rise of so-called "atheist churches." It may sound like an oxymoron, but these godless congregations are growing, and fast. The largest of these is the Sunday Assembly, which has 70 congregations worldwide, including three in Canada (in Halifax, Ottawa and Toronto). The group repurposes the church model—members sing along to Stevie Wonder and Queen, read poetry and listen to guest speakers—to create "communities powered by karaoke, kindness and cake." "The service has to be entertaining, but it's not just entertainment," explains co-founder and comedian Sanderson Jones. "It tries to serve a higher goal, which is to bring people together so that they can live the lives they want to lead."

A similar ethos is behind Full Circle, a New Agey religious movement co-founded in Venice Beach, Calif., by Andrew Keegan. (Remember him? He starred in *10 Things I Hate About You* and in most of my 13-year-old fantasies.) The group describes itself as a "non-denominational non-profit" that offers live performances, yoga, dance classes and support groups.

Groups like these seem to be in touch with the spiritual hunger that's out there right now. But with all the demands on our time, it's not always feasible (or desirable) to be in the same place on the same day every week to get our fix of community connectedness. Especially not when we can plug in anytime we want.

That's why more and more faith communities are turning to the Web. Thiessen cites an example from his own parish, where the pastor is now fielding questions from the congregation texted to him in response to the sermon. Technology has cut down the hierarchies in religious institutions, shrinking what Vosper calls the "chasm between the ▷

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pulpit and the pew." Even the pope, voted *TIME* magazine's 2013 Person of the Year, is on board, spreading his message to more than 4.5 million Twitter followers.

But while these virtual tools are neat, people finally seem to be attuned to the idea that in-person connections are missing in their lives. I know I am. It bothers me that I don't know any of my neighbours and that my barista, the only local I see regularly, still gets my name wrong. I like chatting with Facebook friends, but they won't come over and feed my cat when I'm on vacation or bring me soup when I'm sick. "I don't think the Internet can take the place of communities that can build the resilience that we need in times of change and chaos," says Vosper.

Keegan started Full Circle after a series of bizarre happenings, including seeing a street light explode and witnessing a rose-quartz crystal spontaneously jump off an altar. My mystic experience, although less dramatic, also ignited a spiritual curiosity I didn't even know I had. Now, like so many, I'm craving a place to think and talk about what it all means. Ultimately, I think lots of us are trying not only to be better but *to be* better. "It comes down to this question: How am I going to live?" says Vosper. "You feed yourself every time you reflect on how to exist in relationships with your family, your neighbours and even strangers." Now *that's* something I can believe in. □

RELIGION ON THE RUNWAY



In the past, we've seen religion used in fashion as a provocative way of pushing boundaries. But these days, the sacred sensibilities that are appearing on runways modestly echo what trend forecaster Lidewij Edelkoort sees as a new desire for "ordinary spirituality." Both Derek Lam and Prabal Gurung took inspiration from monks' habits—think ascetic-inspired deep crimson, robes and voluminous shapes.

After all, even Chanel creative director Karl Lagerfeld—who has described himself as a "fashion missionary"—has preached about the fashion sensibilities of the pope. (In case you were wondering, the Chanel creative director has christened Pope Pius XII with the title "most chic.")

In fact, Thom Browne's fall/winter 2014 collection was displayed inside a custom-built church in a Chelsea gallery, complete with altar boys, a choir and wooden pews from which spectators could bear witness. The candle-and-incense-filled space was a theatrical background for Browne's stiff, structured silhouettes—a noticeably-toned-down collection. Just think of it as religious normcore.

NELSON SIMONEAU (MODEL); IMAXTREE (RUNWAY)