Religion in the Secular Marketplace

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ABSTRACT

A design thesis which proposes to create a new religious mall in the growing Texas suburb of Frisco: a design proposal for interfaith space conceived of as a ‘marketplace of ideas’ in which religions, religious businesses, and also secular businesses may come and go according to the demands of the market, and compete freely with one another for customers.
Sacred space and secular space

“The most exotic religion in the United States is also the most familiar, as strikingly similar to the society in which it flourishes as it is distant from the religion we once knew.”

This thesis project depends first upon an idea of religion which does not differentiate between secular and sacred space. Its precedents are not those highly specialized, permanent, authoritative and rarefied buildings created specifically to evoke the numinous and to banish thoughts of the secular world from the mind of the believer with carved stone and controlled light and carefully orchestrated sequences of ritual spaces. Rather, they are the unexceptional buildings built or appropriated by religions as they sprout, multiply, divide, combine, or vanish according to the tastes of a pluralistic society and its members, cultures, and subcultures: warehouses, rented rooms, houses, theaters, storefronts, gas stations, tents, retail space and commercial space of all kinds. This kind of ad hoc religious space means different things to different religious sects, depending upon their theology, their social situation, and the context. A particular sect may well meet in a warehouse rather than a hand-carved stone temple unhappily and only because they must. Or they may think of what they are doing as appropriating space: taking back secular space in the name of their god or even taking space from a dominant culture and claiming it for their smaller one—a racial group or a cultural group which is tied to a particular religion and for whose members the only space in this city or this suburb which truly belongs to them is this modified storefront or this old theatre building. Many religious sects also attach value to the idea of poverty, of being impoverished according to the standards of the larger society within which they exist if not necessarily according to their own.

Preachers once railed against the theaters which competed for the attention (the business?) of their congregations. Then in the late 1800’s churches first took over old theater buildings and adapted them for use as sanctuary space. It was both a sort of symbolic gesture—going to what was then considered a ‘den of iniquity’ and retaking it in the name of the Lord; holding religious services on what had once been

1 The Transformation of American Religion p. 3
considered the Devil’s home ground; and a pragmatic decision, since these theater buildings, already designed to hold a large crowd and focus its attention on a single stage, proved extremely congenial to the purposes of already intensely experiential and theatrical evangelical preachers looking to bring their revivals indoors or into more permanent homes. Finally, completely new churches were built which still imitated the form of those first appropriated theaters. In much the same way today, evangelical megachurches either establish themselves in old big-box retail stores and megaplex movie theatres or build new complexes which deliberately mimic the forms of the ‘secular’ suburban world: the corporate park, the movie theater, and, yes, the suburban shopping mall. And yet despite this apparent willingness to accommodate themselves to their surrounding environment, these megachurches’ strategy is at the root of isolation from this secular world, not of engagement with it. As documented in Loveland and Wheeler’s book ‘From Meetinghouse to Megachurch’, megachurches create spaces for themselves in imitation of secular spaces. And yet as these authors point out, this mimicry is not effectively nor is it intended as a way of engaging these churches and their members in dialogue with the world around them. The megachurch which provides a whole small city of daycare services, shops, activities, etc. in a physical environment ostensibly like any other in the area—simply allows its members to have a community life much like that which they would have outside the church community, yet exclusively populated by other church members and like-minded individuals. Here are offered the material benefits and atmosphere of secular society without any of its corresponding ‘drawbacks’—the friction between conflicting points of view, the anxiety and fear which the believer may feel faced with a world of presuppositions unlike or contrary to her own, the temptations and doubts offered and fostered in the secular marketplace.

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2 From Meetinghouse to Megachurch, p.
3 “In an ocean of secularism, the full service white megachurch served, in the words of the senior pastor of Second Baptist, Houston, as an ‘island’ to which the entire family could ‘retreat’ for education, fellowship, and recreation. Few white megachurches aspired to the kind of comprehensive cradle-to-grave community Walt Kallestad envisioned, but most offered programs and facilities sufficient to meet virtually all the educational, social, and recreational needs and desires of their members, filling most of their after-work hours and weekends.” From Meetinghouse to Megachurch, pp. 188-189
The atrium in Willow Creek Community Church

(p. 135, Loveland and Wheeler, "From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History")
In the face of and as a response to these exclusive new enclaves of pseudo-public space, this thesis project proposes a multifaith marketplace in which all religions may freely compete. Moreover, it proposes a marketplace in which other more and less secular businesses may compete alongside religion, religious business, and businesses catering to religion, for the attention and the custom of passers-by. This project conceives of itself as, first, a possible and in important ways, humanistic solution to the anomie, to the socially unengaged and inwardly-focused non-public character of the suburban ‘Bible Belt’ landscape within which such churches as these most typically are found. One of the few places where people living in this region continue to meet with people outside their own families is at their churches: it is in fact this which constitutes the great attraction of religion for so many rootless suburbanites moving from anonymous subdivision to anonymous subdivision in one region to another for their jobs. But proselytizing religions are also more than this happy association of the like-minded wherever they may go. They not only offer self-segregating communities to the interested and willing, but go out and aggravatingly force themselves into the personalized ‘bubbles’ of exclusive private space which -uninterested- individuals and families have created for themselves, potentially expose them to ideas in which they do not believe, and to members of their society whom ordinarily they consciously avoid.

This project both provides to these existing religious groups their platform to harangue or woo passers-by, and, by creating a space not exclusively religious in which arguments and invasions of ‘personal space’ may occur, potentially offers this template for social interaction to other social organizations that need not be specifically religious. Or religious in any sense. As religion has already chosen to compete in secular spaces with secular forms of community and entertainment on the terms of secular society, there is nothing at all inappropriate about allowing religions to meet not only each other but their secular competitors as well on this ground. That is, there is no reason why in the halls and on the platforms of this project, the only world-views on offer must be religious.

As nothing but an empty framework offering places to meet, places to publicly celebrate and to encounter others on the ‘street’, and places to advertise, this
project takes the organization and the demands of contemporary religions in America (seen, necessarily, largely with respect to and in competition with the dominant paradigm of Christian religion in America) only as a potential starting place and a template for economic and social interactions of many sorts. For while religions are offered a place (all that they, fundamentally, need) within this project, they are not privileged or offered ‘pride of place’. Within this marketplace any religion; any business of any kind willing to fit itself into this framework may rise or fall according to the market—and the architecture particularly aims to grant it no special immunity, privilege, or authority beyond that of the market. It is conceived of as so entirely adaptable that religions, businesses, political or social organizations may succeed one another here freely, with much greater ease than they may in the ‘big boxes’, purpose-built for one particular business or another and omnipresent around the proposed site of this project, and for which adaptation to secondary uses after the original business expires is often a difficult problem.

Frisco, Texas: an abandoned big-box grocery along Preston Rd., which runs right through the center of town.
Proselytism, advertising, and the ‘religious economy’

“Some readers may shudder at the use of market terminology in discussions of religion, but we see nothing inappropriate in acknowledging that where religious affiliation is a matter of choice, religious organizations must compete for members and that the ‘invisible hand’ of the marketplace is as unforgiving of ineffective religious firms as it is of their commercial counterparts.”

Contemporary religious organizations—American religious organizations in particular—already promote themselves to the general public in the same way as any business, through aggressive advertising, the careful tailoring of a certain image, and effectively catering to the desires of their customers.

D.A. McGavran’s book ‘The Bridges of God’ opens by asking the question: ‘How do *peoples* become Christian?’ And the major shift in thinking which this book proposes to the missionaries of its day is right there: the idea that the church, if its goal is to convert as many people to the faith as possible, must appeal to ‘peoples’ and not ‘persons’: the object of missionary activity becomes a series of focus groups, as it were, rather than individuals. And it is this book, written in the 1950’s, which instigated the ‘church growth’ movement in Christianity. ‘Church growth’ is what might be called an ‘ends-oriented’ approach to missionary activity: the goal is above all for a church to increase its attendance rate. And the Biblical verse typically quoted in favor of this approach is 1 Corinthians 9:22: ‘I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.’ And questions of community within the church and of the way in which the church may in turn contribute to or how it should behave towards the non-church community are all subordinated to this overwhelming goal of evangelism. This approach to ‘church-building’, as it were, stands in sharp contrast to at least two other relatively recent contemporary developments in religious community-building in the Christian church: the ‘house church’ builders, and the C.E.B./communidades ecclesiales de base. The ‘house church’ communities advocate books with titles like ‘Church After Christendom’—that

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4 The Churching of America p. 8
is, they typically anticipate a future in which Christianity or religion in general are *not* ascendant or even especially well-tolerated, and model themselves in theory upon the early Christian church before it received the sanction of the rulers of Rome: their primary concern is for the interior quality of the insular communities they build for themselves, not for the numbers of people they may induct into these communities, the efficiency with which these communities may or may not convert non-Christians to the faith, or for what socio-political effect these communities may have on the secular world. The ‘communidades ecclesiales de base’, on the other hand, the product of a very different social situation in a far-removed part of the world though popular as an idea among the socially conscious religious, are primarily concerned with improving the lives and social standing of their overwhelmingly poor membership in the secular and in the political world: the C.E.B.’s are and have been largely the work of radical ‘liberation theologians’ whose first concern is always for the church as ethical actor on the world stage, or what was referred in the early part of the last century as the ‘social gospel’: the church working in favor of the poor and disenfranchised.

The primary uniting activity as well as the main raison-d’etre of the contemporary evangelical Christian church is proselytism, or in the church’s own terminology, evangelism. Community-building for its own sake and the ‘morale’ or individual faith of the many members of these growth-oriented evangelical Protestant churches are secondary concerns to the main task *of* these churches—to maintain a constantly increasing membership. As one of the pastors who runs a network of small start-up churches in the Frisco area told me, such a church is like a living organism, which either continues to grow or begins to die. This particular church organization, ‘Stepping Stones’, has chosen to ‘seed’ many independent mid-sized churches in the Plano-Frisco-McKinney Texas area rather than to create one leviathan megachurch. However, this strategy too was explained in terms of the efficiency with which it could propagate the faith: the idea being, as this pastor also told me, that many pieces of ice in a glass cool the water faster than just one large chunk. At one Wednesday evening bible reading (held, like the services of this particular church, in the conference room of a local motel) which I attended, even the newest members of a
very small new ‘seed’ church were immediately educated not only in what they themselves should believe, but also in the proper ways to in turn bring yet more members into the church by immediately passing on all that they had learned to others as quickly and as often as possible. But while on the one hand, evangelism constitutes the individual activity of each member, bringing family, friends, and acquaintances to the church fold one by one on private initiative (and churches seem to consider this to be the most effective proven way of expanding their territory), ‘evangelism’ is also conducted by the church organization itself on a grand scale. Such churches make liberal use of billboard, of television, of movie theater advertising—of all the same strategies employed by any area business, in whatever measure that they can afford.

Any product advertised in these venues offers more than just an efficient new tile cleaner or a well-made suit: in the hands of the advertiser it becomes the promise of novel or exciting experiences, or the first step towards a completely new and improved, idealized lifestyle. The company selling clothes or shoes or cars may do so by selling them as a part of a complete image of a person whom the prospective buyer would want to be—the product on the billboard is worn by or driven by or held in the hands of some model individual, sits on the table of a model home, stands at the center of a model family. Alternatively, certain ads and strategies of product placement promise not only the ideal ‘real’ life, but a small taste of a purely fantasy life as well: product placement in movies alongside advertisements which steal images from popular escapist entertainment. And contemporary advertisements for church services overtly make use of all of these tactics of contemporary advertising. After the commercial success of the film ‘The Passion of the Christ’ in the United States, any number of churches used images from the film or mention of the film in their advertising campaigns on billboards, television, and in movie theatres, under text like ‘You’ve seen the film, now get to know the man!’ . Likewise, religious organizations advertise using images of the sort of person that they propose to make their converts into, living the sort of lives which they will expect their adherents to lead: a billboard advertising the Frisco Bible Church, located very near the proposed site of this project, has an image of a child on his grandfather’s shoulders; churches
on the more conservative and less accommodating end of the evangelical spectrum tend to advertise using images of families. More ‘modern’, what are called ‘seeker-oriented’ megachurches tend on the other hand to use pictures which might just as easily have been lifted off of the many adjacent ads for new expensive subdivisions—trim men in athletic wear riding bicycles, young laughing individuals and sometimes families, all of whom seem meant to look reassuringly secular, unexceptional if successful, and possessed of all the goods which the contemporary secular life affords to some.5

“The confident hope that God’s judgment and blessing were on their way soon has both comforted and catalyzed oppressed peoples for centuries. But today many middle-class Pentecostal congregations appear very much at ease with the status quo. Now they seem confident not that Jesus is coming soon, but that He probably isn’t, and that therefore nothing will interrupt their pursuit of success and self-indulgence.”6

Prof. Harvey Cox and other theologians and scholars who would argue for the potential of religion to be a positive or even potentially revolutionary force in the world, especially on behalf of the poor and disenfranchised, are naturally less than pleased with this complacency on the part of so many of the largest and most successful of the modern megachurches, at least in the United States. And many of the theological ideas developed within Christianity in the last century—particularly of the Charismatic movement, which favors the passage from Nehemiah 2:20 which claims that ‘God will prosper us’—make holding certain beliefs relative to an eventual afterlife equally as rewarding in the present life. If the ‘Protestant work ethic’ of the Calvinists was based upon the idea of a completely transcendent god whose favor or disfavor was already given and unalterable though it would manifest itself in those already elect as material success, the ethic of the modern Charismatic is based on the idea of a God whose favor is immanent in all things for those who simply believe in him (and evidence that belief by attending a charismatic church), and who protects the faithful from material harm and rewards them materially—and this is very often

5 www.churchmarketingsucks.com
6 Fire from Heaven, p.319
specifically interpreted as financial harm and financial reward. Hence Charismatic theology and the sort of soft Pentecostalism often found in popular megachuches makes itself attractive to the already successful by justifying their wealth as divinely sanctioned and deserved, but also to the very poor to whom it is often presented which rhetoric that sounds like a sort of sanctification of the ‘American dream’.

The very asceticism and other-worldliness of ‘traditional’ church organizations relative to their trend-setting and following brethren (contemporary churches with their music-and-performance-heavy, light-on-demanding-theology services) is itself a marketable feature. A certain billboard advertising such a church simply reads ‘WE DON’T DO ENTERTAINMENT’ in white on black block lettering, next to a picture of what appears to be a typical medium-sized ‘mainline’ church, a red brick building with a white steeple. The ad looks like something which wasn’t produced by an advertising firm, as it almost certainly wasn’t, and the building which this church meets in ‘looks like a church’ (red brick, peaked roof, white steeple) in the same way that the average ‘seeker church’ designed to appeal to those turned off by the image of a ‘traditional’ church intentionally doesn’t. Both images have their niche appeal, just to different marketing groups.

Image from an actual church billboard

7 www.churchmarketingsucks.com
8 http://www.mmiblog.com/monday_morning_insight_we/2006/01/the_bible_way_t.html
The philosophy of the ‘growth’ church stands in stark contrast, as already mentioned, to that of the ‘house churches’, whose primary interest is first and foremost the quality of their often very tiny communities, and whose adherents generally regard the numerical expansion of their church networks as something bound to happen eventually ‘according to the will of the Lord’, but not in itself their primary concern. And yet even these means-over-ends oriented religious organizations still use the language of the market to describe themselves, what they can offer, and what they are: here is a telling quote from Wolfgang Simson’s house-church manifesto ‘Houses That Change the World’:

“‘Once quality was a natural fact of everyday trade’, writes Steve Smith in his management book The Quality Revolution. ‘Then, during the 1930’s, mass thinking began to take over. First came mass-production, then mass-service: “Pile them high, sell them quick”. Volume was the new God.’ The early decades of the twentieth century were also the time when many modern-day evangelistic operations and ministries were born, their general philosophy neatly fitting into the spirit of their time. An obsession with quantity and mass-ministry created a blindspot in the area of quality, which is often still evident today.”

The house churches and their quality-over-quantity exponents have thus simply constructed themselves as the tiny artisanal craftsmen of the religious market, as opposed to the big box retailers and strip-mall stores of the ‘church growth’ churches and megachurches.

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9 Wolfgang Simson, Houses that Change the World, p. 220.
A Frisco Texas church advertises along the highway
Religion, ‘experience’, and the Shopping Mall

“That malls depend increasingly on entertainment, or that business has become theatrical in many senses will not surprise this book’s readers. The rationale for the ‘Experience Economy’ is implicit in the mall’s nature and certainly evident in its history.”10

“Church growth experts often used a shopping mall analogy to explain how many late-twentieth century Americans decided what church to attend. ‘People will drive past all kinds of little shopping centers to go to a major mall, where there are lots of services and where they meet their needs. The same is true in churches today in that people drive past dozens of little churches to go to a larger church which offers more services and special programs,’ Rick Warren observed. In effect, consumerism rather than denominational loyalty motivated the choice of a church.”11

Religion—particularly contemporary religion—is selling an ‘experience’ every bit as much as a theater ever did or as a shopping mall now does.

Religion competes in a market together with other sellers of unusual experience: and so, for example, those Pentecostal sects which engage in such esoteric forms of practice and worship as snake-handling, speaking in tongues, faith healing, etc., may find willing and eager adherents even among the most ‘genteel’, well-regulated, affluent of suburban gated communities—indeed, on one level it is to just such communities as these that the appeal of a sharply sectarian, ‘edgy’ religion may be strongest. As Prof. Harvey Cox noted in the class he teaches on Pentecostalism at Harvard, the more unconventional and even dangerous church practices of the Pentecostals—drinking poison, walking on serpents, may be compared to those (secular) retreats selling extremes of experience in which contemporary businessmen walk across hot coals, or to other religions usually considered “primitive” in the modernist discourse. Similarly, in Europe those often most attracted to the emotive and highly experiential Pentecostal sects of Christianity are fairly to quite well-off white collar workers.

10 The Malling of America
11 From Meetinghouse to Megachurch, p. 117
Of course, contemporary religion also has been shaped by more obvious attempts to cater to a population raised to expect the market to conform to and exactly provide for their needs and desires. While some churches may offer the exotic and exciting, many others bring in large congregations, or rather audiences, simply by catering to the more everyday of religious needs and offering religion packaged in its most accommodating and least demanding, that is, in its most readily consumable form (in much the same way that big-box retailers trade on convenience and low cost rather than on the carefully orchestrated ‘shopping experience’ offered by the large regional malls).
The Site

The city of Frisco is one of the fastest-growing in the United States—a typical Texas suburb roughly 40 minutes' drive from Downtown Dallas. Immediately across the street on one side from our new multifaith mall's proposed site lies a newly built gated community ‘with homes beginning from the $600,000’s’, a few minutes' drive away another such development with slightly less expensive new houses has the unintentionally hilarious name of ‘Meritage Homes’. Frisco is raw, new, and changing with unbelievable speed: almost every new roll of the land, it seems, is crested in the distance with encroaching rows of freshly built and half-built houses in neat rows with the sun glaring off their yellow insulation and naked wooden studs; a drive in almost any direction down the fast-moving roads through Frisco whips past cows and beleaguered ranches one second, new IKEA outlets and Walmarts the next. Almost every as yet undeveloped plot of land is marked with a ‘For Sale’ sign or a computer rendering of the retail development, new school, new corporate park, or subdivision to come.

A half-built Frisco subdivision spreads over a field.
The inhabitants of Frisco are largely drawn here by their jobs; the city's planning department has won Texas-wide awards for its efforts at making itself somewhat distinctive among its neighbors (through various New Urbanist tricks) and yet it is still not, for the most part, a city which draws new inhabitants on its own virtues, because of the distinctiveness of its space or community. It is little less undifferentiated and generic-feeling than most of the new developments shooting over the Texas landscape in all directions around it.
The site of the proposed project: 83.75 acres alongside Panther Creek
The site of the proposed project: 83.75 acres alongside Panther Creek
The Multifaith Mall at Frisco

Particularly important to the idea of this multifaith mall is the idea that it should be as completely adjustable, as impermanent in any one form as possible. A rambling cluster of space frame structures, itself intended to be adaptable, adjustable in the long term through adding or removing platforms (Fig. A) in turn supports between three and four floors of fluidly adjustable fabric-suspended floors (Fig. B). The project began with the idea of the fabric revival tent or movable tabernacle, but as its cloth structures are neither designed to exclude one another rigidly nor must keep out the weather (as they all inhabit one larger space-frame structure), the cloth language of this project became not one of taut membranes but of entangled or woven drapes.

Two examples or formal precedents are pictured on the following page: one in fabric, the other in steel. Note the startling contrast of soft slack fabric interior and taut fabric exterior on an old revival tent, the Union Tabernacle, and the large, empty, simple interior of a temporary church in a permanent building, Billy Sunday’s Tabernacle in Illinois. The latter was the product of an alliance between the evangelist Billy Sunday and local businessmen: the businesses built a warehouse with a large undifferentiated interior, made it available to the traveling revival for a few weeks, and then converted it into smaller spaces for their own commercial use after the revival had ended. A similar warehouse-like church was called by its leader Paul Rader the “Big Steel Tent”: both forms pictured, the fabric and the steel alike, have to do with adjustability, adaptability, and ad-hoc space.12

12 From Meetinghouse to Megachurch, p.83
Revival tents, drapes, and an old-fashioned big-box church

Above: Union Tabernacle, or the Movable Tent Church (p. 21, Loveland and Wheeler, "From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History")

Below: The Billy Sunday Tabernacle (p. 88, Loveland and Wheeler, "From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History")
Sections along the edge of the main interior corridor, 1" = 1'-0"

Movable drape/adjustable billboard studies
Section along the edge of the main interior corridor, 1" = 1'–0"

Movable drape/adjustable billboard studies
Section model, $\frac{1}{4}'' = 1'-0''$
Section model, $\frac{1}{4}" = 1'-0"$ (2)
Fabric drape plan study: charcoal on newsprint
Fabric drape plan study: fabric collage on board
Plan: Charcoal on newsprint
Water/utility plan study: Fabric, yarn, ink collage on board
Study model for a small piece of the larger building
(the same chunk of the larger building pictured in the following model)
Structural frame model 1/8" = 1'-0"
Bibliography


